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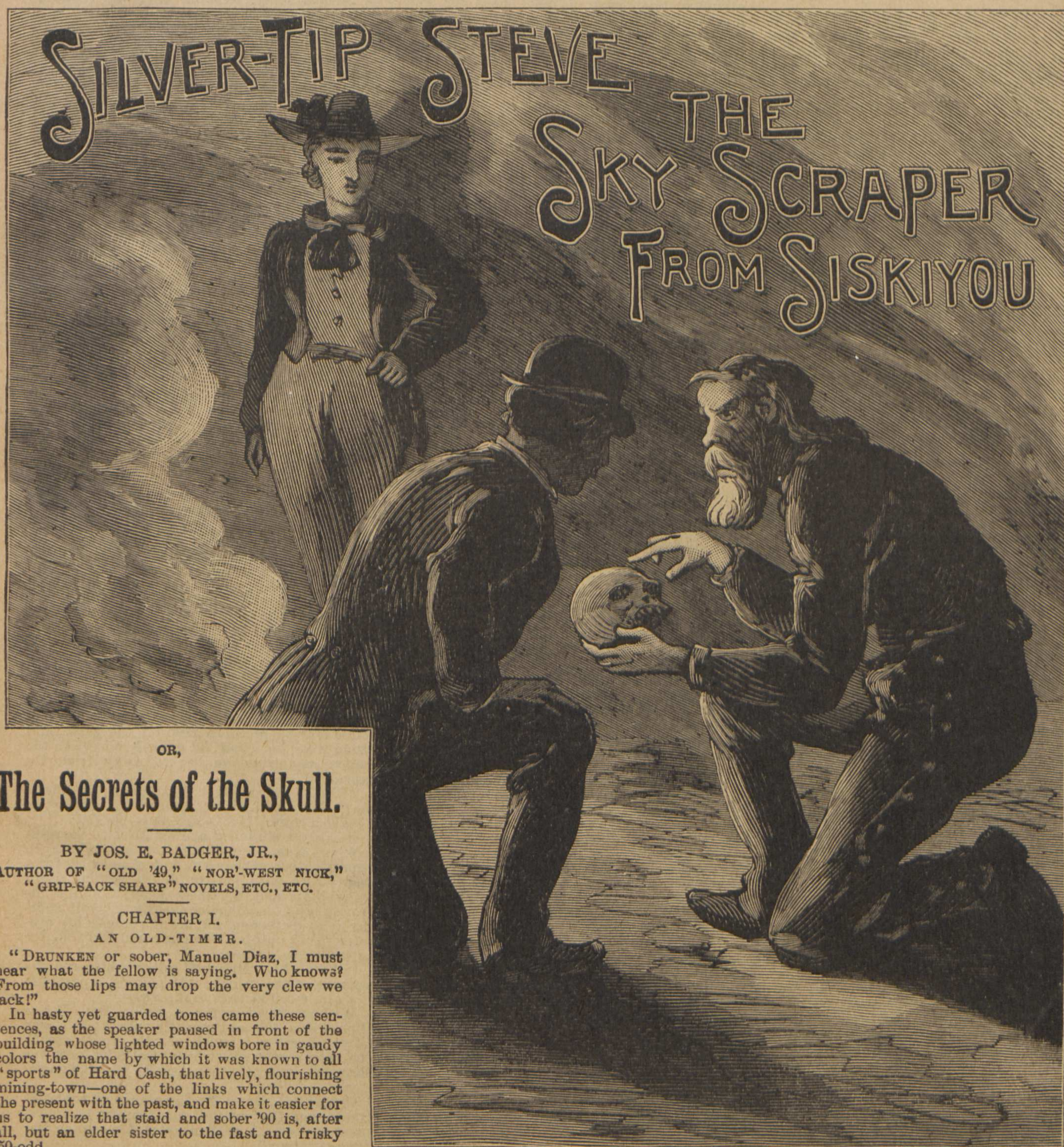
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## OR, The Secrets of the Skull.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,  
AUTHOR OF "OLD '49," "NOR'-WEST NICK,"  
"GRIP-SACK SHARP" NOVELS, ETC., ETC.

### CHAPTER I.

#### AN OLD-TIMER.

"DRUNKEN or sober, Manuel Diaz, I must hear what the fellow is saying. Who knows? From those lips may drop the very clew we lack!"

In hasty yet guarded tones came these sentences, as the speaker paused in front of the building whose lighted windows bore in gaudy colors the name by which it was known to all "sports" of Hard Cash, that lively, flourishing mining-town—one of the links which connect the present with the past, and make it easier for us to realize that staid and sober '90 is, after all, but an elder sister to the fast and frisky '50-odd.

The glass front of "The Mint" was brilliantly

"I KNOW THIS—SEE! THE POOR FELLOW WAS MURDERED, AND THIS DID THE FOUL DEED!"



lighted, while the big red globe above the entrance played no mean part in attracting the human moths, without which the blackleg-spider must starve or turn honest.

Don Felipe Cagatinta and Manuel Diaz, as they would have given their names if challenged, were on the point of crossing the threshold of this saloon and gambling-hell combined, when the first named came to an abrupt pause, on catching a few words spoken by one already an inmate of the bar.

"You could 'a' knocked me down 'ith a feather when I worked it through the brain o' me that this Hard Cash was the same place I used to know 'way back in the 'Fifties! An' then I wouldn't 'a' b'lieved it, only fer the heap o' ruins over yen', in the shadder o' the hills!"

"You mean the Haunted Hacienda?"

"Is that what ye call it, pardner?"

"Oh, I didn't name it, but the boys who did are willing to swear the title is a mighty snug fit. I haven't lost any spooks!"

"Nur me, nuther! But—ef spooks thar be, an' tharabouts, I'm open to lay long odds I kin name 'em off the reel. Some on 'em, 'anyway!"

"Then you know—"

"That it's a monstrous long time atween drinks. Fill 'em up, Johnny, an' take it out o' that!" hiccupped the fellow, turning to the bar with a drunken lurch, and slapping down a golden coin. "I'm Jerry Black, the old-timer, an' I kerry a license fer gittin' fuller'n a hungry tick on a yaller dog's right ear! Slide up, critters, an' take yer awful medicine 'long o' Uncle Jerry! He's three-thirds drunk, dirty, ragged an' greasy; but what's the odds so long's ye'r happy?"

While the bar was lined, and all eyes were on the glasses and decanters, Don Felipe and Manuel Diaz quietly entered the saloon, gaining seats at one of the little round tables with which the place was furnished, and where they trusted to escape particular notice.

"This isn't your first visit to Hard Cash, then, Uncle Jerry?"

"Who told ye so, pardner? Ef he tells ye ag'in, jest whisper in his off ear that he lies, fer Jerry Black!"

"But I thought you said—"

"An' I'll say it ag'in, ef one time hain't loud enough: I've bin in these parts, heaps o' times, yes; but that was long afore anybody ever thought o' makin' a town hyar."

"When the old ruin, over yonder, was alive?"

"Missed it ag'in, pardner," with a drunken chuckle, as he turned his back to the bar, leaning against it, with elbows thrust back as a support to his slouching figure. "Them ruins was made when Fremont kicked out the Greasers, in '47, while I didn't strike Californy ontel the Fall o' '50."

"You don't mean to say you came here so far back as that?"

"That's once ye've hit it, pardner, to offset yer misses," grinned Jerry Black, not too drunk to find a sluggish pleasure in baffling the curious citizen. "I didn't come hyar then, fer the Feather River rush was jest ripe, an' I follered the main drift, in course. An'—talk 'bout yer booms, an' yer strikes, an' yer— Why, gents! it's Uncle Jerry Black that's tellin' of it to ye all, an' it's Uncle Jerry as says ye don't even begin to know what a live an' lively time is!"

"Mebbe ye'll say we didn't know nothin' 'bout machinery in them good old days; mebbe ye'll say we couldn't yank down a hull mount'n o' quartz at a grab, an' run it through the stamps fer to clear a dollar a ton a'ter payin' all expenses; mebbe ye'll say we let more run into the tailin'-pile then we ketched fer our buckskin pouches; but all I'll answer back is this: The critter as didn't make his neat little pile in them good old days, was too lazy to work, too skeered to steal, an' didn't hev savvy 'nough fer to pick out the winnin' keerd when it lay right onder his nose!"

"Of course you made your pile, Uncle Jerry," ventured the other, with a smile on that side of his face furthest from the old-timer, as he took note of that ragged, greasy, dilapidated exterior.

"Made it, an' lost it, an' made it ag'in—too durned many times over fer keepin' tally 'thout settin' of 'em down into a book at the happenin', mind ye, pardner. I kin call back the time when Uncle Jerry had yaller ducats 'nough fer to make a rich man's eyes bug clean out onto his cheekbones. An', t' otherwise, I kin 'member the day when Jerry Black wasn't wuth the price of a drink to raise a sweat on the inside o' his flume—an' that's mighty short, pardner, as ye kin tell by measurin' the length o' my neck with the two eyes o' ye!"

"What's the matter with measuring the inside of it, Uncle Jerry?" laughed the citizen, with a nod toward the barkeeper. "It isn't every day that we get hold of a regular old-timer, and when we do, we want to treat him white."

"Nother nail, with your letter onto the head of it, pardner," nodded Black, with drunken politeness.

"The seed isn't ripened, Uncle Jerry, that's to grow the tree to furnish planks for your coffin," laughed the citizen, then harking back to the trail which seemed to interest him the

most deeply. "And you knew this section long before Hard Cash was born?"

"Or even thought of—jes' so, pardner," with a jerking nod that tipped his greasy slouch hat over one eye. "Mind ye, I don't say I was the first critter to diskiver the kentry layin' 'round loose this-a-ways. That'd be a lie, an' whichever else he mought be, your Uncle Jerry was never 'rested fer murderin' of the truth. But I do say that when I fu'st lit down onto this stretch o' airth, they wasn't no lonesomer 'pearin' range to be found in seventeen States!"

"More elbow-room, then, eh?" Well, Uncle Jerry, you can hardly say it's a change for the worse?"

"Change? Waal, now you're talkin', pardner! Sech a change that I hain't over-ketched-up till yit! Sech a mighty change that I've sot in fer to git good-an'-full-drunk, jest so I kin wake up in the mornin' an' play it's all a dream; what I was lookin' fer, ye mind, not the lay-out as I find it, pardner!"

"Then you didn't come to pay Hard Cash a visit, Uncle Jerry?"

"When ye gwine back, pardner?"

"Going—I don't catch on, Uncle Jerry."

"To the home o' punkin-pies an' apple-sass an' ee-tarnal questions, o' course, pardner," chuckled Black, his brief irritation melting away before the laugh which greeted his sally. "Ef you hain't a Yankee, then you're li'ble to spicion o' stealin' a Yankee's tongue. But that don't matter, an' I ain't kickin', fer I've bin ketched whar I wanted to ax a heap o' questions my own self. F'r instance: when I come top o' the range, back yonder, an' ketched a glimp' o' this burgh, I jest honed fer some honest critter I could ax if my two eyes hedn't gone back onto me! Fer I couldn't swaller it down: sech a ee-tarnal change, an' everythin' so mighty diff'rent from what it was the last time I hit this walley."

"How long ago was that, if it's a fair question, Uncle Jerry?"

"Fifteen year', never a day less! Jest a wilderness, it was, then! I hed the pictur' of it all writ back o' my two eyes, an' when I come top o' the ridge I lotted on seein' pritty nigh what that pictur' 'minded me of. 'Stead o' that—a-sportin', sneezin', puffin' town! An' I hed to take two long looks at the pile o' ruins over yen' way afore I could be sure I hedn't got turned 'round in my last sleep, an' fetched up somewhar else than I counted on doin'."

"Fifteen years, eh? Long time in this age, Uncle Jerry! Hard Cash is less than ten years old, though you'd hardly think it, to look. And you were here, then? Prospecting, of course?"

"Who told ye so mighty much, mister?" with a growl of sudden suspicion entering his tones. "Whar I come from last, I knowed a man to ax so many durned impident questions he lost his front teeth, all in a lump! Your snags hain't so mighty purty, pardner, but mebbe you count 'em wuth the savin'?"

The inquisitive citizen laughed it off, and by calling for a fresh supply of liquor, quickly had Uncle Jerry's ruffled feathers smoothed.

"Waal, you couldn't sca'ce call it prospectin'," drawled Black, relinquishing his empty glass with a sigh of drunken regret, his recent anger forgotten with the suspicions which gave it birth. "Yit—I don't know! I was lookin' fer somethin', too! An' ef lookin' was findin', 'tain't this style o' outfit you'd ketch Uncle Jerry totin' 'round on the back o' him—no, sir!"

There was a slight stir of growing curiosity among his hearers at this owlishly significant speech, but after the recent rebuff, the man who had done most of the questioning hung back, and none other seemed willing to take his place.

The two persons still seated at the little table in one corner of the saloon, unconsciously learned a bit nearer the old-timer in their deepening interest, but neither of them ventured to speak aloud.

"An' that's jest what I was sayin', gents," nodded Black, with gloomy emphasis. "Ef lookin' was findin', it's your Uncle Jerry Black as'd hev a bonanza by the tail, so mighty big, a train o' mules couldn't begin fer to swing one eend of it! But lookin' ain't findin', wuss luck! An' ef I wasn't a clean fool, I'd never—I say, pardner?"

"What is it, Uncle Jerry?"

"You don't happen to mind ef ary other critter hed better luck?"

"What sort of better luck?"

"They hain't bin no big find made anywhar nigh to— Who's a full-grown monkey show, dug-gun ye? Never set two eyes onto a man before, I don't reckon, that ye gawp like that—eh?"

"Don't get huffy, man; I was only wondering what you meant by finding a bonanza. What sort of bonanza, Uncle Jerry?"

"Who said bonanza? Go shake yerself, critter, an' git over bein' crazy 'fore ye scrowdge in on a honest stranger come hyar to— I'm on it bigger'n a wolf, an' when I hear the keards a-rippin' over the green, it sets the ducats a-scrabblin' fer to git out o' my kicks an' plunk down onto the painted pictur's! Whoo-oop! An' I'm a-comin', red-hot fer fun, frolic an' glory! Hold the deal ontel I git thar, pardner!"

howled the old-timer, making a drunken lurch across the saloon and under the curtained arch which separated the bar from the gambling hall in which the nightly games were just being opened.

## CHAPTER II.

### TACKLING THE TIGER.

"WATCH him, Tio Manuel?" hurriedly whispered Don Felipe, to his companion, rising from the little table as Jerry Black passed under the looped-up curtains. "'Tis of our bonanza the drunken bobo was maundering!"

Unnoticed by the other occupants of the bar, the two Spanish-looking strangers followed after the drunkard, watching his movements with strong if carefully veiled interest.

The room devoted to the goddess of chance was but a continuation of the saloon proper: an oblong space, large enough to accommodate the patrons of two faro lay-outs, with a roulette wheel and a larger wheel of fortune at the further end of the room.

Although the hour was early, and the games hardly open, as yet, a goodly number of eager gamblers had hardly sought the tables when Jerry Black entered, industriously "laying a snake fence" with his whisky-tangled legs.

Drunk though he undeniably was, the old-timer was not too far gone to bear in mind the unwritten laws of gaming, hardly less sacred here on the border than in the more select establishments of the far East.

His boisterous whoop died away as he crossed the portals, and he took on the ludicrously solemn expression of one drunk, who wishes to be deemed sober, stepping high and planting each uncertain foot as noiselessly as possible to one in his condition, scowling ferociously whenever his calculations failed.

"Billy-be-durn sech a floor, anyhow! Laid on big an' 'weenty rollers, nary one on 'em alike! Stiddy, thar! Ah—ha! ketched ye that clatter, anyhow!" giving a subdued chuckle of delight as his heavy boot met one of the "waves" and pressed it to a level without an echo. "Fu'st thing I'll do when I bu'st the durn ole bank'll be to buy 'em out an' lay a floor that 'll—ketch my fool self, somebody!"

Jerry Black came down in a heap, with a shock that fairly shook the frame building and drew all eyes in that direction.

Luckily the deal had just ended, and the drunkard received smiles instead of curses from dealers and gamblers alike.

"Pologize, gents—pologize all over, does Uncle Jerry!" he spluttered, rising to his feet with a bow that came very near duplicating his downfall. "Got so mighty many ducats in my kicks, fer to pay over the pritty pictur's, that they sorter 'stroyed the even balance o' the old man! 'Pology 'cepted, gents?"

One good-natured fellow steered the veteran to a chair at the faro table, and with owlish gravity Uncle Jerry hunted a few coins out of his pockets, piling them on the edge of the table before him, waiting for the shuffled cards to be replaced in the silver box for a new deal.

He had eyes and thoughts only for the game, and even had his suspicions been on the alert, he would hardly have suspected those two strangers of playing the spy on his movements.

In faro, as in poker, it is a rule that "money talks," and "cards speak for themselves." No man knew the rules better than Jerry Black, and though he was already drunk, and rapidly growing drunker, he placed his bets in silence, making no remarks whether he won or lost.

The siege was a brief one, for the fates were against him, and when the deal ended, his little pile of money had dwindled to, barely a couple of coins. These were silently placed on the fresh deal, and five minutes later both crossed the table to help swell the bank.

Uncle Jerry fumbled in his pockets, one after another, but when the deal came to an end, he had found nothing more to risk on the game, and rising from his chair, he gravely bowed to the dealer, saying as he backed away from the table:

"I was bu'st or git bu'sted, gents, an' that's me! So-long, pardner! Come back at ye when I make a raise. Hate to go, but—got to!"

He almost stumbled against the two Spanish-looking men, mumbling an apology, then stumbling across the room to feel vacantly for a door where none existed, finally sinking down in a limp and nerveless heap, to pillow his frowzy head on a doubled-up arm, placidly snoring away as though all the world was his oyster, ripe for opening when he could find time for attending to business.

"Watch him, Manuel!" softly whispered the younger of the twain. "If playing a part, follow him when he tries to slip away."

Without pausing for a reply, Don Felipe slipped into the seat recently vacated by Jerry Black, drawing a pouch of gold from beneath the costly *serape* with which his slender form was shrouded, evidently intending to join the gamblers.

One or two gave a fleeting glance at the newcomer, but that was all the interest his movement excited. A moment later, his coming was forgotten by all.

Yet Don Felipe was a personage well worthy



a second inspection, and in almost any other place he would have received it, too.

Though enveloped in the rich *serape*, his figure seemed slender, of graceful rather than muscular proportions. His skin was dark, in perfect keeping with his jetty hair and trimly kept mustaches which shaded without concealing his red, full lips.

His features were clean-cut and regular. Only for the cold, stern expression which rested upon his face and glittered from his dark eyes, he might have been deemed effeminate in looks.

Very different was Manuel Diaz, who now stood close at the back of his master, his little bead-like eyes flashing frequent glances toward the slumbering drunkard, then passing swiftly over the faces of those with whom Don Felipe had aligned himself, to end by noting each wager placed on the painted cloth by the small hand of his young master.

Manuel Diaz was far past the noon-mark of life, judging from his withered features, his gray hair and sparse beard; so old that his frame seemed to have shrunken until the skin hung upon it in wrinkled folds. Yet his movements were swift, easy, silent, reminding one of the velvet-shod panther more than aught else.

Don Felipe played boldly, but without ostentation, placing bet after bet as the cards were dealt, his handsome face showing no emotion whether he won or whether he lost. In the first case, he let both bet and winnings lay on the lucky card; in the latter, he silently replaced the loss with an equal sum.

As a natural consequence, the deal was hardly half over before he reached the bottom of his pouch of gold, and with a fleeting glance over a shoulder at the grim face of his companion, Don Felipe made a slight gesture which was answered by another and much heavier purse.

As he gave this, Manuel Diaz drew a long-bladed knife, changing his position slightly to one side, so that he could rest the point of his polished weapon on the edge of the table, without leaning across the form of his master.

One or two of the players started a bit, and the pale-faced dealer across the board gave man and master a brief but comprehensive look.

"Pardon, gentlemen," said Don Felipe, in low, musical tones. "My servant is old and rather childish, but if his action gives offense, he will readily—"

"Long's he don't use it, all right, I reckon?" smoothly uttered the dealer, flashing a look along the line of players.

"If there is no cheating—"

"Silence, Tio Manuel!" interposed Don Felipe, with a frown. "We are playing with gentlemen, not ladrones, remember!"

The old fellow drew back a bit at this reproof, but still kept his weapon unsheathed and ready for instant use should the occasion arise.

Both man and knife were quickly forgotten by the other players, for just then fortune, which had up to that stage of the game held the scales fairly level between player and bank, turned decidedly in favor of the Spanish-looking gamester, giving him several heavy wins in unbroken succession.

Still he left the gold to accumulate on the cards as long as the one originally selected had a representative left in the silver box, and this peculiar style of play quickly arrested the attention of the other players, in more than one instance causing them to cease betting altogether, the better to watch his fortunes.

Though hardly a whisper was passed, that deal was hardly at an end before all under that roof knew that a battle royal was going on between the stranger and the house; and gradually a double line of eager spectators drew around the players' side of the lay-out.

When the fresh deal was ready to open, only Don Felipe had money on the cards, and the slender, pale-faced dealer flashed a surprised glance along the line before uttering:

"Make your game, gents!"

"I'm out, just now, pardner," laughed one of the nightly patrons, with an answering nod. "It's growing too mighty rich for my blood, and I reckon I'd rather watch this stranger pull your claws than to come in for a bit of the fun my own self!"

"If I am intruding, gentlemen," hesitatingly began Don Felipe, only to hear a chorus of negatives, supplemented by free advice to press his streak of luck while it lasted. "Thanks," with a slight smile. "The very least I can do in return for such courtesy is to make or break with the least possible delay. As a favor, senior," bowing to the dealer opposite, "may I ask your limit to-night?"

As he spoke, a tall, fine looking man under middle age passed back of the table and quietly took the seat vacated by the dealer. Then he made reply:

"To oblige you, dear sir, I'll lift the limit. Make your game!"

There came a pleased murmur from the crowd at this, for Tom Ashley only filled the dealer's chair on extraordinary occasions, and a few side bets were quietly made that 'the tiger' came out first best.

If Don Felipe heard these words, he gave no sign, coolly placing his bets at brief intervals

as the deal progressed, showing a thorough knowledge of the game as well as an extraordinary degree of nerve for one so young in years.

One of his wagers was placed on the king, and a dozen turns were made without affecting that card; but then it came out on the player's side, and Ashley silently pushed over the winnings. Don Felipe added them to his original wager, then leaned back in his chair, his long-lashed lids half closed as he awaited the result.

Two turns later the king came out against the bank for the second time. And once more Don Felipe added his winnings to the pile, only signifying that he wagered *against* the king, by placing a "copper" on the heavy stake.

The next bet, on another card, was lost. Then came two wins, both of which were transferred to the copper king.

Twice more was this repeated, until the king stood to win or lose a little fortune; then—the king came out as banker's card!

"Pulled it off, through pure grit, by glory!" cried one excited spectator. "Go fer him, stranger—go fer him *hard*!"

A trifle paler than ordinary, Tom Ashley paid the heavy loss, then gazed steadily toward the stranger who was striking such hard blows against the bank.

"All on the king—to lose," quietly spoke up Don Felipe, as calm and unmoved as though a fortune was not already at stake. "I can think of no quicker method of giving my place to these polite gentlemen."

Ashley turned to whisper a few words to the case-keeper, who laid down his box and hurried away toward the saloon, Ashley softly drumming on the edge of the silver box, his eyes on his white fingers.

Don Felipe gazed languidly at the gambler for a brief space, then almost timidly ventured:

"What is wrong, my dear sir? Is my wager too small?"

"Tell you in a moment, sir," replied Ashley.

"If the wager is too trifling in amount for a turn, I can raise it higher, my dear sir," smiled the Spaniard, gently.

Ashley said nothing, for just then his partner came hastily up, and after a brief whispering, an understanding was reached, and the deal went on as before.

Not for long. At the third turn, a cry broke from the spectators.

### CHAPTER III.

#### WITHDRAWING THE VAIL.

"THEN you really think that is the place, Uncle Steve?"

"I shorely does, lad. Jest as shore as them fool critters down yen' way j'ines in a-calling' of it the Ha'nted Hacienda!"

Both speakers gazed in the indicated direction, the silvery beams of the recently risen moon allowing their eyes to rove over the broken and irregular lines which marked the gloomy pile of ruins; once an extensive mansion, built on Spanish lines, but now a monument of decay.

There was light enough to make out their own proportions, with something of their features, if not expression; and as each will have to figure prominently before the reader in the events to come, a few lines in the way of description may not come amiss.

The first speaker was a young man, who could not have long since reached his majority, and whose name was Nash Baldwin. He was of medium size and weight, his physique combining strength with activity. A good judge of athletes would hardly have made the mistake of selecting him as an "easy nut to crack."

His hair, cropped close, was of a light brown color, being a couple of shades darker than the light, silken mustache which shaded his lips. His features were fairly regular, and, taken as a whole, made his face one that men would have termed good-looking, ladies handsome. His eyes were large, of deep, honest blue. Ordinarily they expressed frank good-nature, but just at present the light of the moon betrayed a serious, even troubled look in their depths.

Stephen Hurst, far more widely known throughout the mining-camps of California and the West in general, as "Silver-tip Steve," or the "Sky-scraper from Siskiyou," was at least double the age of his present companion, and quite possibly had passed the three-score mark.

In build he was little short of gigantic, standing six feet four in his bare feet, and weighing considerably over two hundred pounds; all bone, muscle, sinew and solid flesh, without even the suspicion of fatness.

His complexion was naturally dark, and long exposure to the elements had added tan until his hue was that of an Indian. But no red-skin ever wore such curly locks or thickly growing beard and whiskers. Stephen Hurst was as "white as they make 'em," in all save complexion.

There was one particularity about Silver-tip Steve which excited attention, if not curiosity, wherever he went or was first met. Each hair of his head, each strand of his magnificent beard, while being black as coal from

the roots to within a short distance of the end, had turned nearly snow white at the extremity, giving the man a most remarkable appearance, especially when there was wind enough in motion to part his beard or toss his curling locks of hair.

Many a title has been won by less than this, and when it is added that, on occasion, Stephen Hurst could out-roar the grisly king of the mountains, while his angry grip was scarcely less to be dreaded, the origin of his peculiar title needs no further explanation.

"Uncle Steve?"

"That's me, lad!" ejaculated the elder man, giving a slight start as the silence which had fallen upon them was broken.

"Do you know how many weeks it has taken us to find this Haunted Hacienda, as they call it?"

"Why wouldn't I, Nash?"

"During all of which I have never asked question or offered an opinion one way or the other. Yet—am I still a bread-and-butter schoolboy, uncle?"

"All o' which means—jest *what*, lad?"

"That I'd really like to have a ray of light cast upon the darkness, uncle," was the resolute response. "Why have we been searching for this particular spot? What interest can I—or you—have in yonder pile of ruins? Was it here that father—vanished?"

"Wait. Le' me think a bit, lad," slowly muttered the Sky-scraper, his head lifting and sinking with each word as his joined palms supported his chin.

"If there is anything I hadn't ought to know, uncle, of course you are right in keeping it from my ears. But—I've been told so little about—mother would only weep when I questioned her, and you—"

"Come a monstrous sight nigher doin' the same thing then ever you tuck reckon, boy!" almost harshly interposed the old man, lifting his head and meeting that steady, slightly impatient gaze.

"Then I must wait still longer, Uncle Hurst?"

"How much hev ye picked up 'bout your pap, Nash?"

"Little—far too little!" with a touch of passionate regret in his deep tones. "I know that he was a soldier in the war with Mexico. I know that he was honorably discharged, and that he came to California shortly after the gold fever spread over the country."

"You was two year old or so, when he come, wasn't it?"

"Yes. I was born in '50. Father came to California in '52. He never returned home. Why, Uncle Hurst?"

"Thar's only one reason open, lad: beca'se something or somebody made it so he couldn't," was the response.

"You believe he was—killed?"

"I've tried more times then thar's stars up yender to make it come out dif'rent, Nash, but what else *could* 'a' kep' Theodore Baldwin so many weary years away from his home and his wife and child? If *his* home had been like that of—Stiddy, ye durn ole fool!"

Steve flung back his head, striking his broad and deep chest with clinched fist, much as an angry gorilla is said to sound its defiance. He quickly rallied, and for the time being dropping the rude dialect which he had almost unconsciously picked up through his long years of wandering far from civilization's centers, he began the recital which Nash Baldwin dreaded almost as much as he longed for.

"It's a knowledge that ought to have been yours, long ago, Nash, but when you've heard the whole story, I reckon you'll see why I never found courage to tell it all—up to this night."

"If you'd rather not tell it, Uncle Steve, I can wait still longer," slowly said the young man.

"Waiting wouldn't smooth the rough places, nor turn black to white, lad," said the veteran, his tones sounding cold and hard as they came through the partial gloom with which they were enveloped. "I've only been waiting to make sure of the spot—yonder heap of ruins—before telling you what led up to our coming here. I know where we are, now, and before we go further, you must know all I can tell you about your father's past. Don't interrupt: listen."

"We were boys together, Theodore Baldwin and I. We grew up close neighbors, and still closer friends. And so, when young men, and the word of war with Mexico came, we were among the earliest to enlist."

"Never mind what we did when we got into the thick of the fighting. That time's long past, and another war has overshadowed it. I'll only say that we tried the best we knew how to hold our end level, and if any one man did, that man was Theodore Baldwin."

"We went in privates, and came out officers. Theodore earned his promotion, ten times over, and part of his luck stuck to me, I reckon. It couldn't very well miss, for we were never much more than arm's length apart, from start to finish."

"I've read the records, Uncle Steve," quietly interposed Nash Baldwin at this point. "I can tell you just how you won each step from the ranks: shall I?"



"Not if I can choke you off," with a short, hard laugh, so different from his usual careless, jolly, hearty manner, that it gave the young man quite a start. "I'm talking of your father, lad, and only bring myself in because the two lives were almost like a single one. Only—to him came love and sunshine, to me—bah!" flinging out a hand with almost savage scorn for his own brief weakness.

"In one way I was luckier than your father, lad," resuming his former tone and manner. "I never got a scratch deep enough to be remembered longer than a week at a stretch, but Theodore—well, he shook hands with Death a dozen times, and once, at least, we reckoned it was all over but digging the grave!"

"I know: that was one of the stories I remember mother telling me," softly interposed the young man. "And you—only for your reckless daring, Uncle Steve, that grave must have become a reality!"

"That's all right, lad," with an uneasy shrug of his broad shoulders. "I happened nigh, and of course I couldn't leave my chum behind with the Greasers. So—I fetched him off the field."

"And nursed him back to life again!"

"I was tired of fighting, and found hospital service much easier, that was all. Shut!" with a sudden harshness in his tones. "Can't you see that I'd rather have curses than thanks, just now? I've got that to tell which calls for grit and bull-dog courage, boy! Far more than I showed on that bloody day!"

"Please say no more, uncle, if it hurts—"

"It hadn't ought to hurt, after all these years. It *doesn't* hurt, only—don't speak so soft: in the dark it sounds too much like—a voice I used to love and fairly worship!"

This was a new and totally unexpected phase in that rugged, reckless character, and not knowing just how to treat it, Nash Baldwin acted with true wisdom—held his peace and waited for the end.

"That was the last of your father's fighting, boy," quickly resumed the veteran, all emotion vanishing as by magic. "His skull was badly fractured, and he lost an eye, to leave out minor wounds. It was a long and a hard fight, but we fooled old death that bout!"

"We returned home, and once there, your father soon won back his old good health. And if he wasn't quite so handsome in the eyes of strangers, be sure his scars did not lessen the love of those who knew his manner of winning them."

"Then—there were two sisters, neighbors to us both. We left them hardly more than little girls when war was declared. We found them women grown when we came back. And—Theodore fell in love the first. And—I always followed him, you know, lad. And so—well, we made a sort of family affair of it, and all four of us were married on the same evening."

"I needn't tell you much about the sister Theodore married. You knew her, lad. And no boy ever was blessed with a better, purer, nobler, holier mother than you!"

"And your—my aunt?" ventured Nash, after a brief silence.

"Not yet; wait!" hoarsely muttered Hurst. "As I said, you were born in '50, not so long after the rumors of gold-finding in California were proven true by returning pioneers, with their pouches of the yellow dust. And then—well, we fought against the fever for a time, but at length we gave way, as so many other poor devils did. And so, in the spring of '52, your father and I joined a train going overland, bound to make our fortune!"

"Some few did make theirs, but we were not among the lucky ones, at first. For two years we barely made enough to keep us in grub and tools, with an occasional hundred or so to send back home to the folks."

"I began to grow discouraged, and to hint at returning home, but your father wouldn't hear to anything of the sort. He'd come to make a fortune, and until that pile was made, he'd never show the white feather. And of course I couldn't leave him. And so we toiled on, hoping against hope, shifting from point to point, joining in each new rush or rich strike. Until—"

"Letters were few and far between, in those days, though we heard once or twice each year from our folks. And then, one day—I could tell you just how it looked and felt, that day, if I chose! One day a letter came to me. I failed to recognize the handwriting on the outside, and foolishly wondered who it could be from before breaking the seal. Then—I knew!"

"It was from mother, directed by the postmaster of our village. And inside—I never read it all. I couldn't. I just made out that my—your aunt—had gone away, in the night. With another man!"

"Uncle Steve!"

"Mother wrote the words. I knew she wouldn't lie. Theodore was away. I just wrote a line for him. I said I was going home to kill her!"

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### THE LOST MINER AND HIS BONANZA.

NASH BALDWIN stood in silence, gazing down the hill at the ruined hacienda. He could find no fitting words to speak, for he knew that the

strong man sitting there by his side was suffering agony far too bitter to be relieved by words.

Yet there was little show of this, outwardly. Stephen Hurst spoke coldly, evenly, though so slowly. And only the brief, almost broken sentences betrayed the fierce agony lying below that stolid surface.

"It's growing late, and I'm sleepy, Uncle Steve," at length ventured Baldwin. "Can't you let the rest go over until morning?"

"No. I've started, and I'll finish. I've got to tell it all, or you can't understand just why I've brought you here to look for your father. So let me finish, lad."

"As I said, Theodore was away, to be gone several days. I couldn't wait for his return, nor could I lose the time to hunt him up. So I wrote a few lines, and inclosing the letter from mother, put them where he'd be sure to find them on his return. Then I struck out for home!"

"I can't tell you how I got there. It is all like a hideous nightmare to me, even after all these years! Enough that I saw mother, and learned the whole truth."

"Never mind the details. You never knew your aunt, so to speak. She left when you were but a little boy, and her name was never mentioned in your hearing, after that night."

"Never mind, either, how I found them. It was only after a chase and then a blind search—long and weary, a living death! But I never gave over. I never once forgot my oath to kill him—and her!"

"It was in '55 that she left. It was late in '57 when I found them, at last. They were together, living in a quiet little town high up near the Canada line. They passed for man and wife."

"I never spoke a word, so I was told, later, when we met. It was at a party, or dance, in the hotel, I believe. I shot him through the brain, and she fell across his body, giving an awful scream. I often wake o' night, even yet, with that shriek ringing in my ears."

"You didn't—you surely didn't—" faltered Nash, huskily.

"No. I meant to kill her. I'd sworn by all things holy, to kill her, after him. But—I couldn't! And it didn't need. She was dead when the people picked her up. And I—the next I remember was when they discharged me from the asylum, as sane once more!"

"That was in '61, and I found that another war had begun. I never went home. I couldn't. I enlisted the next day, and was sent to the front in less than a month."

"I'd be lying were I to say I made a good soldier, for hard though the fighting was that came to our share, it wasn't enough to kill the past. I had to study up all sorts of devilment, if only to keep from hearing that scream—from seeing that ghastly white, frightened face!"

"It was in those days that the name of Sky-scraper got fastened upon me, and I know I did my level best to deserve the title. I had to! Only while fighting, scouting, spying, or breaking the rules and regulations of camp life, could I gain anything like rest."

"I enlisted to be killed, and I did my level best to win my ends; but while scores of better men were taken from my regiment, I was left. Never once did a bullet break my skin. I cursed my luck, after each battle, and more times than you would believe, I had gun or pistol cocked, with muzzle at brain or over heart. I don't think I was a coward, as that meaning goes; but I couldn't kill myself!"

"Having told you what urged me on, lad, you'll not think it boasting in me to say that, had I been of the mind, I might have climbed out of the ranks and won my straps, if not my stars, long before the end of the fighting came."

"I was offered promotion, if I'd promised to give over my wild larks, but as often I'd break loose afresh, to fetch up in the guard-house. And so, when the end came, I was still a private."

"It was several months after my discharge before I could pluck up courage to go back to the old home. Only for thoughts of mother, I never could have done it. And then—I found only her grave!"

"Your mother found me lying there; it was close by the spot where her own parents rested. She coaxed me home with her, and at word of your father—my old chum—I went with her."

"Only to learn that in all those long years Theodore Baldwin had never come home! That for long, weary years no word had been received from him, no tidings could be obtained from him. And, feeling that her husband surely must be dead, your mother had put on mourning for him."

"I found a letter from Theodore awaiting me at my old home; it had come shortly after my return, and mother kept it sacredly for her boy, against his home-coming!"

"It was a glad, joyous, sunshiny letter, such as Theodore could never have written had he received the message I left him. Indeed he chaffed me about my homesickness, and advising me to bring my wife back with me when I returned!"

"And then he went on to speak of a marvelous strike he had made during his prolonged absence; he said he had wandered much further

than he had intended, on leaving me, staying months instead of days as at first set. He wrote guardedly, for he meant to send the letter by hand, as a neighbor was returning home with his little pile, and he seemingly feared to trust him too far. All he said was that our fortune was made, at last! For, of course, we shared in good as in evil."

"He said he'd wait for my coming to help guard the treasure home, particularly as he believed he was on the track of a rich placer—too promising to throw such a chance over his shoulder."

"Well, you can guess what followed. I promised your mother to find Theodore if living, or learn his fate if dead. And with that intention I struck out for California once more."

"The country had undergone so many changes, and such a long time had elapsed since that letter was written, that it was little better than hunting for a particular grain in a sand-heap; but I had no other aim in life, and be sure I did my level best to keep my pledge to your mother."

"Of course I failed, else you and I wouldn't be here this night, my lad; but I did all mortal man could do, with the means at my command."

"I covered the old ground faithfully, finding a flourishing town almost over the claim at which we did double work for dogs' wages. But with all my efforts, I failed to strike even a single clew to the missing miner. True, I found one or two who dimly remembered having known such a person, but men live fast in a mining country, and out of sight is almost surely out of mind as well. They could tell me nothing, and when I received a letter from your mother, begging me to return without delay if I would see her alive, I left California once more."

"You know what I found when I reached your home; a fresh grave and a broken-hearted lad!"

"I know," huskily muttered Nash Baldwin. "And I know, too, who it was that soothed that lad, who tried to make him see that there was a silver lining to the black clouds. Only for you—"

"I was simply trying to pay back a debt far older than the lad I found then, my boy," softly interposed Hurst. "Let be. I haven't finished the story I set out to tell, though I'm drawing near the end."

"You know what it was your mother wanted to see me for, before death claimed her, lad?"

"For one thing, to ask you to take the place of the father I hardly remembered seeing."

"Yes. That was it, in part. She left her wishes in writing, when she knew that her summons was likely to come before I could reach home. She asked me to watch over you, to be unto her son what his father would have been unto mine, had our circumstances been shifted. She asked me to see that you remained at school until your education was finished."

"And your hard labor earned the money it cost!"

"I had to work, to kill thought, lad," was the grave response. "You never knew it then, but you do now. By giving me work to do, you served me ten-fold better than I ever could serve you. But let that pass. I have yet to explain why I brought you out here, on what must have seemed like a wild-goose chase."

"I know: it was in hopes of solving the mystery hanging over my poor father's disappearance!"

"That, of course," with a nod. "But without a better clew than was given me to base my first search upon, failure would have been insured from the very start."

"Then—you had a clew?" with swift interest showing in both voice and glowing eyes.

"Yes, I had a clew. I found it while you were at college, and it took me many a long day to puzzle out its real meaning: if, indeed, I've really solved the enigma!" the last words coming with an echo of irritated doubt, despite himself.

"And that clew, uncle?"

"I found it among your mother's papers, while looking them over, one day, and came very near destroying it as a bit of childish drawing on your part, years before. I did cast it aside, but as it fluttered to the floor, I caught sight of a few lines in pencil, written on the back of the scrap."

"If there was more light, I could show them to you now. As it is, I'll simply say the words were written by your father, and bade your mother give the chart to me!"

"Yet—you only found it by accident."

"She must have forgotten all about it. It came—by the date—when I was off hunting—when I was away. And when I did return, I was too eager to be off again to give her time to remember such a seeming trifle."

"A chart, you say?"

"Yes. For a long time I couldn't make out what it meant. Not until I had a curious dream, one night. Then I knew—or thought I knew. And when I resumed the study in the morning, I felt sure the dream was based on truth, and that I at last had a clew to the bonanza which Theodore wrote to me about!"

"Do you mean that it is a drawing of the



place where he found the treasure he wrote about?"

"I believe it's a chart of the spot where he hid that treasure, rather!" was the slow, earnest response.

For some little time there was silence between them. Both seemed busily thinking, and it is not difficult to divine the nature of their reflections.

"Why didn't you send me word, at once, Uncle Steve?" at length asked Baldwin. "I would have come without—"

"I knew you would, but I kept your mother's wishes in view, and let you stay on until graduation. Then, too, there was money needed for the journey I had in view, and I had none too long a time for winning that."

"While I was spending your hard-earned wages!"

"Drop that!" with sudden sternness. "I've explained why I'm your debtor still. Don't force me to touch that subject again. And now—you know why I've led you to this spot!"

"Down yonder lie the ruins forming part of the map drawn by your father! I wouldn't mention it to you until I'd satisfied my own mind. I say it now: that is our first step in solving the mystery of Theodore Baldwin's disappearance, with his lost bonanza!"

Again there was silence between the two men, so oddly matched in looks as in years. Each sat gazing down the hillside and across the level valley toward the ruined hacienda, showing dim and phantom-like under the silvery rays of the nearly full moon, now sailing high in an unclouded heavens.

What had wrought that ruin? What dire tragedy might be connected with that almost shapeless pile? What—

Nash Baldwin gave an abrupt start as his reflections reached that point, and grasping Silver-tip Steve by an arm, he extended a hand in the direction of the ruin, muttering swiftly:

"Look! what does that mean, Uncle Steve?"

#### CHAPTER V.

##### A FORTUNE ON A CARD.

"If he didn't, I'm a liar!"

"Pulled it off, for keeps!"

"Put your luck up for sale, and—"

"Knock it down to my bid!"

Almost every one of those who had been watching the outcome of this bold attack on the bank of Ashley & Collins, gave a great breath of relief as the turn of the cards decided the ownership of that big pile of cash beneath which the king was hidden from view.

When the first glimpse was caught of the gaudily printed court-card, and all spectators knew that nerve had won, the unwritten laws were forgotten for once, and the chorus of excited murmurs quickly swelled to what was little short of a united cheer for the handsome young stranger.

For there lay the king, on the bank's side, changed from winner to loser by the bit of black wood—a painted checker—topping the little mound of gold!

Tom Ashley, his face more than one shade paler than usual, glanced swiftly up into the face of his partner, who stood motionless at his left rear. Neither spoke, but Ashley lifted the hand that had exposed the unlucky card to his drooping blonde mustaches, slowly smoothing them, first on one side, then on the other.

Was it to conceal the nervous contraction of his red lips?

Of all gathered near the faro-table, Don Felipe Cagatinta alone betrayed no signs of emotion, seeming so totally unmoved, so unconcerned that a new-comer would never have believed him the person who had awakened all that excitement.

Leaning back in his chair while awaiting the fate of his bold betting, Don Felipe seemed far more deeply interested in the cigarette his nimble fingers were shaping, than in the cards as they slowly slipped from the dealer's box.

From under the *serape* with which his slender figure was shrouded, his right hand produced a silky bit of corn husk and a few flakes of golden tobacco. With a deftness which could be admired but hardly described, and calling into play only the one pair of fingers, the tobacco was flitted in a regular line along the husk, the soft envelope was rolled up and fastened ready for use, all being done with a single movement, as it were.

Only a Mexican, or one of allied race, could have performed that feat with such lightning swiftness and inimitable grace.

"A light, Manuel," softly spoke Don Felipe, turning his head partly toward his servant, who gave a start as the spell was broken; for he, too, was breathlessly watching for the turn of the card.

"Blessed be all the saints, señor! 'Tis our card!" hoarsely muttered Diaz, his hand shaking so violently that the match expired with a flicker.

Don Felipe frowned at this, speaking a few words with seeming sharpness, but the reproof, if such it was, was lost amid that outburst of congratulatory admiration. And it was not until his cigarette was fairly aglow, that the bold gamster fairly looked at the lay-out.

"How'll you have it, stranger?" coldly asked

Ashley, the brief delay permitting him to recover his usual composure.

"Coin or bills, 'tis immaterial to me, señor," was the quiet response. "Whichever best suits your convenience."

"You're the winner, not us."

Don Felipe showed a line of white beneath his silken mustache, but there was nothing like mockery in his tones as he spoke again:

"It must come like a breath of fresh air, this losing, señor! I can imagine how monotonous an unbroken string of winning cards must become to a gentleman on *that* side of the board."

Daniel Collins gazed steadily into that smiling face, his black eyes beginning to smolder with a dangerous fire as he searched for a hint or suggestion of aught but square dealing on their part.

"Easy, stranger!" came a low, warning whisper from bearded lips close beside Don Felipe. "He's p'izen—if you give him a bluff!"

Black Dan Collins looked it, too!

There was a strong contrast between the two men who held the mint in partnership, so far as outward seeming went, at least.

Ashley was tall, built on racing lines, quick and graceful as a panther in all his movements. His hair and mustaches were too light in color to be called brown, too dark to be termed flaxen. His skin was very fair, and smooth as that of a woman, while his large eyes were blue as the unclouded heavens on a summer day.

On the contrary, Dan Collins was short in stature and heavily built. As a usual thing his movements were slow, almost sluggish, though on occasion he could act quickly enough, as more than one boisterous "tough" had proved to his discomfiture.

His short-cut hair was black as the plumage of a crow, and though he wore neither beard nor mustaches, and shaved each morning, the thick-planted roots showed through the swarthy skin with inky blackness.

Just now he was eying Don Felipe from beneath his heavy brows, trying to read what lay back of that languid speech, more than half-inclined to resent it as a covert insult.

"You've done your share of winning, I reckon, sir?" he spoke.

"Do you really think so, my dear sir?" smiled the stranger.

"What's that?" with growing sternness. "Have you any fault to find with the manner in which you have been treated in this establishment?"

"I? I have naught but words of praise, señores!"

"Then—it wasn't a slur against the dealing you were flinging out on the loose?" persisted Collins.

"How could I be so ungrateful?" laughed Don Felipe, with a careless nod toward the pile of money which Tom Ashley was rapidly counting on the king. "There is ample proof that our friend knows not the meaning of a crooked deal."

"That's all right, then," with a nod of grim satisfaction, as his black brows resumed their natural position. "You're a Mexican—"

"Pardon, señor; a Californian, rather," was the swift correction.

"Californian goes, then. Maybe you didn't spit out just the words you intended, or maybe I didn't hitch on the right meaning to them. I half-reckoned you meant a slur against the house, and *that* I couldn't swallow without giving it a chew. So—let it drop."

Tom Ashley put a scrap of paper across the table, and Don Felipe nodded assent, after a glance at the figures thereon.

"Correct, señor!"

An equal amount was quickly counted out before the dealer, part of the sum being taken from a portly wallet which deftly changed hands under cover of the board.

"Count it over, stranger," crisply said Ashley, as the pile of gold and bank-notes crossed the table.

"Thanks! Your word is more than sufficient, señor," bowed Don Felipe, pushing the pile further to the left, until it rested mainly upon the nine-spot. "There are two mnes still in the box, I believe?" he added, half-questioningly, at the same time shifting the money from the king toward the other pile.

Both partners glanced mechanically toward the case-keep, but neither spoke. Instead, they seemed half-puzzled by the words and actions of the Californian.

Don Felipe crowded the cash together, then leaned back in his seat once more, deftly filling and rolling another cigarette. Not until this was lighted did he glance up, his brows arching with faint surprise as he saw the partners motionless.

"Well, señores, my money says the nine wins!"

"All of it?"

"Why not? 'Tis hardly polite to keep so many gentlemen out in the cold, simply because *one* player is winning. So—will you deal, my dear sir?"

"Not to-night!" crisply said Ashley, bunching the cards which had been drawn from the box.

"You carry too many guns for us, stranger,"

grimly laughed Collins. "I hate to say as much, but—you've hit us about as hard as the bank can stand, for this bout!"

"It is not—" began Don Felipe, with a half frown, only to have his voice drowned by the wild cries and excited ejaculations which burst from the crowd.

None of them were personally enemies to the partners, and only a few were there who really wished them ill-luck; but there never yet was a bank broken without all who witnessed or heard of the *coup*, feeling that the victory, in a measure at least, belonged to them.

"The bank is broken, then?" persisted Don Felipe, his dark eyes winning a peculiar glow hard to describe.

"Too near it for us to stand another bet like that," curtly replied Collins, with a nod toward the pile of money. "You've made expenses, to-night, at any rate, and we'll be happy to see you again, later."

"Why not now, señor? I am here to-night; I may be far away on the morrow. So—at what figures do you value this place, señor?"

"What do you mean?"

"What valuation do you place on this building, these fixtures, all and everything connected with the Mint?"

"It's not for sale."

"Why do you ask?" put in Ashley.

"Not through idle curiosity, señores, be sure," bowed the lucky player. "You are men of business; I am another. I make you a business proposition. I have won more gold than I care to lug about with me. You have an establishment to which I have taken a strong if unaccountable fancy. Now—this is my proposition:

"I will stake yonder pile—twenty thousand dollars, more or less—against your place of business, just as it stands, barring the animate fixtures, of course," with a light laugh.

Another murmur of interest ran through the spectators at this truly audacious offer. Would the partners accept it?

Ashley and Collins interchanged looks, but neither spoke, at once. They seemed weighing the proposition in their minds.

"My winnings against the Mint, señores," repeated Don Felipe, with a barely perceptible sneer in his tones. "And that the end may come more quickly, I name monte as the judge. Will you accept?"

"A single deal at monte, you mean?" slowly asked Ashley.

"A single deal, señor. That will clear the field more speedily, and give time for others to test their luck before cock-crow, if the fates decide in your favor."

"And if you win?"

"Does lightning ever strike twice in the same place?" laughed Don Felipe, his lids half-closed as he gazed at the spiral of blue vapor curling upward from his lips.

The partners drew back a little, whispering earnestly together, while all waited their decision with more or less interest. Only Don Felipe betrayed no anxiety. Cool, calm, unmoved, he waited the end.

That whispered consultation did not last long. The offer was as advantageous as it was bold. The Mint, at the most generous estimate, was not worth more than one-half the sum which the Californian was ready to stake against it, and though to lose would leave them pretty well "broke," the partners were thoroughbred gamblers, and not men to throw such a good thing over their shoulders.

"You say that you will stake that pile—every dollar of it—on a single deal of Spanish monte, against this house?"

"And its fixtures, both of bar and gambling, señores," bowed Felipe.

"Then we'll try it a whirl!" declared Ashley, resuming his seat and pushing the box aside, shuffling the cards as he added: "You hear the terms of the bet, gents, and can be witnesses in favor of the one who wins!"

He pushed the cards toward Don Felipe, for cutting, but the Californian bowed toward Collins, saying softly:

"Oblige me, señor, by proving your own evictor?"

"What do you mean by that?" frowned the dark gambler.

"After you have cut the cards, señor!"

#### CHAPTER VI.

##### MANUEL DIAZ MAKES HIS MARK.

"Cut, man!" frowned Ashley, flashing a glance into the face of his partner. "Can't you see it's only a bluff?"

With a quick motion Dan Collins divided the pile of cards into almost equal portions, then turned his glowing eyes upon the smiling Californian, who was deftly rolling a fresh cigarette.

"There's the cut! Now—what did you mean?"

"You surely are not growing angry, señor?" with a lazy arching of those jetty brows.

"Stop!" placing a strong hand on the arm of his partner, checking him as he was about to place the cards together for dealing. "Not a turn until he's explained!"

"That is so easily done, señor!" howed Don Felipe, still with that peculiar smile upon his



face. "You see, senores, all present know you thoroughly. They know you to be square men, honest as the day. On the contrary, we are strangers here, and our record is yet to be made."

"What has all that got to do with it?"

"Everything, senor, if you will permit me," bowed Don Felipe. "Some players are hard losers. Not that I think either of you two are of the number, I beg you to believe."

"You haven't heard us grumble, anyway?" grimly nodded Ashley.

"No. That is true. Nor would you grumble if fortune still smiles upon me and frowns upon you, senores. But there are others, who may look at matters in a different light, and for that simple reason I wish to disarm them in advance. For that simple reason, senor," bowing to Dan Collins, "I begged you to cut the cards. Then, if fate favored me, no man could insinuate that skill had more to do with bringing about the change in ownership than bare luck!"

"You're taking a good deal for granted, don't you reckon?" sneered Ashley, as he placed the cut at the bottom, squaring the cards before him, ready to begin the deal. "Is it so mighty sure you're going to turn up winner?"

"My money says so," with another light laugh, then adding: "Have I made my meaning sufficiently clear, senor?"

"Clear enough. Turn the cards, pardner!"

With swift, practiced fingers, Ashley obeyed, facing two cards, one for the house, or banker, the other for the player. And again did Don Felipe laugh softly as the king of hearts was faced for him.

"His winning card, by glory!" ejaculated one of the intensely interested witnesses.

"'Tis hard luck, senores, but who can baffle fate?" smiled the Californian.

Neither partner spoke. Like all of their class, they were superstitious, and this allotment of the cards impressed them both as an evil omen to start with.

They had met with other losses, fully as heavy as the sums won by Don Felipe that night, though seldom in such a comparatively brief space of time; but, as a rule, those losses had come through a rival banker seeking a battle royal, with closed doors and no spectators. Then, it was with each and every move made after careful study, while this stranger had played with seeming rashness, betting at random and taking chances which no true gambler would think of daring.

Was this girlish-looking stranger a "hoodoo?"

That thought alone was enough to unnerve nine gamblers out of ten.

Still, the game was made, and there could be no drawing back, even had either of the partners really wished to "take water."

Outwardly cold and unmoved, Tom Ashley dealt the cards, one by one, with every open eye in the room strained to catch the first glimpse of the fateful bit of pasteboard on whose turning so large a wager depended.

Only Uncle Jerry Black was missing the treat of all in that part of the building; and he still lay as he had fallen, snoring sluggishly in a drunken sleep.

There is little to describe about a game of monte, when played by dealer and a single gamester, and its chief merit consists in its ability to ruin or enrich a man almost in a breath.

When the cards have been shuffled and cut, two cards are faced, one for the bank, another for the player. If a card to match that dealt the player makes its appearance first, he wins, if for the bank, he loses, equally, of course.

This, in brief, was the game nominated by the Californian, and is the one generally understood when monte is spoken of, though there are several other variations of the game to be met with.

As stated, the king of hearts had fallen to the lot of the Californian, while Ashley had given himself a deuce.

One by one the cards were faced from the deck, falling in regular turn first upon the pile accumulating before one gamester, then in front of the other.

A full dozen turns had been made without bringing forth a decisive card, each turn adding to the intense excitement of the spectators. To judge from their pale, strained faces, their repressed, irregular breathing, their tightly-clinched fingers, any one of those two dozen witnesses might have been the one with so much at stake, rather than either the dealer or the Californian.

Then—the winning card turned up!

"Tumbled down—all in a heap!" explosively cried one of the spectators, falling back from the Californian, involuntarily.

For the deuce of diamonds showed for an instant in the air as Tom Ashley turned it face upward, to drop it upon his own pile.

The game was ended, and the Mint would not change hands, that night, at least.

"Are you satisfied, sir?" asked Ashley, his voice hardly as steady or even as usual, lifting his blue eyes to the face of his adversary.

"If not, out with your reasons before another finger is stirred!" sharply added Dan Collins, his black eyes glowing redly.

"Why should I not be satisfied, senores?" quietly answered Don Felipe, rolling another cigarette with fingers never a whit less steady

or dexterous than while he was winning heavily. "Well, you showed your teeth like you thought—"

"I was smiling to think how wisely I laughed before the cards were turned, my dear sir," bowed the Californian, pushing back his chair like one whose business there has come to an end. "Had I waited until now—*pouf!*" with a slight grimace.

"We gave you a perfectly square deal, then?" persisted Collins.

"Square as a—what you say?—square as a die, senor!"

"And you don't ask another whirl, off-hand?"

"With naught to back it, senor? My money is there—my money no longer, but *yours!* Better fortune accompany it to your pockets, senores!" added Don Felipe, bowing low and gracefully as he rose to his feet.

"By the lord of chance, young fellow, *you're white*—so mighty white that you don't get away from this without giving me one square grip—shake!" impulsively cried Collins, coming around the table and warmly gripping the small hand of the Californian.

"And had I won, senor?" smiled Don Felipe, looking into that dark face, with a faint smile.

"Maybe I wouldn't have shook, but neither would I have kicked," Dan Collins declared, honestly, letting his better nature have the upper hand without disguise. "You're a heap sight better loser than you are winner, young gentleman! I will say that much, anyhow!"

"You like me better so, eh?" laughed the Californian.

"Hold on, now—that isn't the right shape to put it in, and—you're making fun of me, eh?"

"Would I be so rude, senor?"

"Rude be—blessed!" locking arms with the young fellow and moving toward the bar.

"You've got to crack a bottle with me, anyway!"

"Pardon, senor, but I never drink," firmly spoke the Californian, freeing his arm with an eel-like movement, before Collins could divine his intention.

"You never—oh, come, now, pardner!" in a tone of reproach.

"'Tis true, what I tell you; I never drink, and while I thank you for your kindness in making the offer, I must decline. And—Manuel?"

"Here, senor," came a low, almost doleful response, as the withered old Mexican touched his master's elbow. "Shall I clear the way, senor?"

Those words came in an entirely different tone of voice, and Dan Collins instinctively started back as he found the keen point of a bared blade almost touching his broad chest.

"Why, you smoky heathen!" he ejaculated, one hand dropping toward the belt of arms about his waist, checked on the instant by the quick apology from the Californian:

"Pardon him, my friend. He knows only my will—he thought I was being detained against that will. He is harmless, only when his master is in danger, real or fancied."

"You're not going? You'll come back, then! Oh, curse it all, man! I want to show you that—"

"Another time, senor," politely but firmly interposed Don Felipe. "'Tis growing late, and I must go. Manuel?"

"Here, senor!"

"We will go home now. *Adios*, senores all!" with a bow which included all others present.

Had he won his last heavy wager, Don Felipe might have found it a difficult task to win clear of that interested crowd, but he had ended a loser, and thus won a certain immunity from the crowd, now eagerly congratulating the partners, or discussing with each other the recent exciting events.

Only a few persons were in the saloon proper, and they hardly gave a glance to the two strangers as they passed through the bar to the swinging screens which filled the front entrance; but as these were passed, an utterly unexpected interruption came.

A tall figure stepped directly before them, one hand removing a slouched hat, the other gently touching Don Felipe on an arm as its owner spoke, in quick but guarded tones:

"You are in trouble, senorita—I see it by your face! May I offer you aid in any shape?"

"Make way, senor!" sternly spoke the Californian, shaking that hand from his arm. "I have no time to waste on drunken—"

The tall stranger broke in with a low, mocking laugh, then said:

"You play the part to perfection, senorita, but should I lift my voice and call out to the crowd in yonder—"

"Make way, I say, you drunken rascal!"

"If I should tell them you are a woman in disguise, what—"

Thus far but no further was he permitted to speak. Manuel Diaz leaped forward, and reversing his knife, struck the insolent fellow squarely between the eyes with the silver-tipped haft of his weapon, felling him to the ground like a log!

"Come—this way, senor!" he hissed, hurriedly, catching Don Felipe by an arm and urging him to flight around the nearest corner, plung-

ing into the densest shadows that offered, evidently fearing pursuit from an enemy or enemies.

"You killed him, Manuel?" exclaimed his master, after a brief space, during which the red light of the Mint was lost to view.

"No; I gave him the butt of my knife instead of the point. I only marked him a bit, senor."

"Better if you had—almost!"

"Why so, master? Who was the drunken bobo?"

"The devil—no less, Manuel!" accompanying the words with a passionate gesture which might almost have been one of despair.

"What! it surely was not—"

"Yes! 'twas Carlos Salcedo, and he called me—*senorita!*"

"The devil! Shall I go back and cut my mark on his black heart, master?" harshly whispered the old man, gripping his knife anew.

For a single breath Don Felipe hesitated, battling with an awful temptation; but then he moved onward, saying in more natural tones:

"Let him go—for this time, Manuel. Maybe he was drunk, after all! If not—well, let the morrow provide for itself!"

## CHAPTER VII.

### AT THE HAUNTED HACIENDA.

No outcry had come to their ears, as yet, such as would almost certainly have followed the discovery of one stricken down by an armed hand so close to a number of his fellow-beings.

Had that swift, deftly delivered blow proved fatal?

Something akin to this query shone in the dark eyes that turned to the face of Manuel Diaz, after a backward glance in the direction of the Mint; but the old man shook his head, while saying:

"No, my master! I struck hard, and rage made my hand weigh heavy, 'tis true, but the breed of Salcedo carry thick skulls. He should be opening his eyes by this, and—"

"Let him go—the dog!" almost harshly muttered Don Felipe, once more in motion. "He bears your mark, good uncle, and if he dares to follow, 'twill be his fate that sends him!"

"You are going—whither, master?" ventured Manuel, after the brief silence, spent in rapid as silent flight through the gloom.

"Home, Manuel!"

"Not—surely not to—" hesitated the old man, catching his breath sharply, one might almost say shrinkingly.

"Surely yes, Manuel! To what these Gringo fools and knaves call the Haunted Hacienda. Do you shrink from it, Manuel? From that—once your loved and happy home?"

"Only for your sake, *nina*," huskily muttered the old man, but gaining strength and resolution as he received no open reproof. "Only because 'tis growing late, and these hills and hollows are full of human devils by night as by day. Only because—"

Don Felipe cut his speech short with a low, hard laugh.

"They are cowards, as well as brutes, Manuel, and where could we be safer from intrusion than in the midst of the fabled ghosts?"

"True—the heretics believe the ruins are haunted!"

"And are they not?" with a peculiar change coming into voice and manner. "Can you even pass within sight of the ruins without meeting those spirits, uncle? Not I! I can both see and hear them! They call me child—they whisper to me of the long ago, when no alien foot dared to trample over—"

Don Felipe broke off abruptly, tossing his head back, brushing a hand across his face like one who strives to drive away a vision.

From the direction of the town, now fairly left behind them, there came a shout or outcry of some sort. The same fancy struck them both: the tall fellow who had fallen before the knife of Manuel Diaz had been discovered by others, or, it might be, he had called for assistance to run down those whom he would only too readily call his assailants.

Side by side master and man stood in the shadows, gazing back toward Hard Cash, cool and steady-nerved enough to wait for certainty before taking positive action. There came no repetition of that cry, no sounds such as a half drunken gang would surely make while setting forth on a nearly blind chase.

"Only a fellow with more tongue than brains, Manuel," at length decided Don Felipe, with a little laugh of scorn. "I was foolish to even think yonder impudent knave would call for help: his insolent pride would not permit such a confession!"

"That, or a still more dangerous feeling, master," muttered Manuel, turning once more toward the ruined building. "If I had heard his voice a little more plainly—if I had caught a fair sight of his face before I struck to clear your path!"

"You gave him your mark, Uncle Manuel," softly laughed the young adventurer, moving forward through the night.

"It should have been the point—and would, had I known the demon then!" gloomily muttered the sanguinary old man.

With a swift motion, Don Felipe caught an



arm and swung Manuel Diaz partly around so that the rays of the moon fell athwart his wrinkled visage. Steadily, keenly those black eyes gazed, then their owner said:

"Why so deeply in earnest, Manuel Diaz? Why so vicious against one who, after all, is more of fool than knave? You are holding something back; what is it?"

"Do you give that as a command, master?" slowly asked the old man.

"If a simple request is powerless—yes!"

"I am your slave, Don Felipe, and your wish is my law," almost meekly bowed the other, yet moving slowly along, now that his arm was set at liberty. "We will go to the hacienda, and there I will tell you all, my master."

"There really is something to tell, then?"

"There is something—yes, señor."

"And about Carlos Salcedo?"

"About Carlos Salcedo, señor."

With a half-smothered ejaculation that betrayed impatience, not unmixed with anger, Don Felipe pressed hastily on through the night, leading the way with a celerity that proved his thorough acquaintance with that vicinity, strangers though the two Californians had seemed to the patrons of the Mint that evening.

Manuel Diaz offered no further objections, his main care being to make sure that no unfriendly beings were dogging their steps. If so, they were playing spy with extraordinary skill, since his keenest looks failed to detect anything to confirm suspicion.

The ruined building popularly known as the Haunted Hacienda, was no very great distance from the town, and brisk walking quickly carried master and man to the spot.

This, as before indicated, had once been a building of considerable extent, like the majority of Spanish or native Californian houses, being for the most part of a single story, forming a hollow square, with a spacious court-yard or patio in the center.

In its days of prosperity this building had been surrounded by a thick and high wall, but this, as well as the hacienda proper, was now in ruins, and under the deceptive light of the moon, the place could hardly be recognized as having once formed a handsome, happy home.

Picking their way through the confused tangle of rocks and vines and stunted bushes with an ease that told of frequent visits, the two Californians gained a fairly well sheltered corner of the ruins, where Manuel Diaz was not long in kindling a small fire, grateful alike for its warmth and the light it afforded.

In part they relied on superstition to escape discovery, but the old man had taken care to start his fire in a quarter of the ruins where its glow could not be seen by any one coming from the direction of Hard Cash; and who would be wandering through those rugged hills at that hour of the night?

While Diaz was employed thus, Don Felipe busied himself with rolling up a number of husk cigarettes, several of which he gave the old man as, with a kindly nod, he accepted the seat formed by his servant's blanket.

"There is room for both, Tio Manuel," using the familiar prefix which signifies "uncle," and which is given to all aged men in Mexico. "Be seated—so! And now, what was it you promised to tell me about Carlos Salcedo?"

"The truth, Donna Felipa."

"On guard, Manuel Diaz!" sharply ejaculated the younger, lifting a hand in additional warning. "Have you forgotten that I am Felipe?"

"I have not forgotten, señorita, but what I have to tell concerns Felipa Cagatinta, not Don Felipe," gravely responded Diaz.

"Tell it, then, dropping titles and names as far as possible. We are alone—yes! But who knows? Even the spirits may carry the unlucky word to dangerous ears!"

"Be it so, my master! Then—you have heard the name of Salcedo before you met this Don Carlos?"

"I have heard the name—pah! They were renegades to their race, their country, their flag! Is it not so, Tio Manuel?"

"Tis so, one and all, my master," bowed the old man. "When the cursed Americanos first raised the flag of rebellion against the good and great Governor Castro, in front of Monterey, who but the then head of the Salcedo family was ready to shed the first blood? And why? Because Señor Don Marcos del Cagatinta—your honored father, my master; may the saints rest his soul—was foremost in drawing the sword against the vile invaders?"

"There was enmity, then, between the two families?"

"There was hatred, bitter and venomous, on one side; scorn and contempt on the other—yes, my master! And so, when fortune hid her face and frowned on the right, 'twas a Salcedo who caused this woeful ruin, my master!" added Diaz, casting a look of mingled sorrow and hatred about them.

"But Don Carlos: he was too young to have played a prominent part in that war. What of him, Manuel?"

"He was one of the serpent's brood, my master, but, as you say, too young to have played a prominent part in this woeful ruin. 'Twas his father, his uncles, his kindred, that did it all!

And why? Partly because of the old feud I hinted at, partly in hopes of winning the vast treasure which was hidden by your honored father before fleeing with his no less honored wife, far from the happy home that was to see them never more!"

"Do you think—surely Don Carlos is not here for that treasure?" hastily exclaimed the seeming young man.

"If not that, in hopes of winning a still greater treasure," was the grave response. "You do not know—you were still too young—that Don Carlos Salcedo paid your now sainted mother a visit, several years ago, and insolently begged of her the honor of her daughter's hand in marriage!"

"What!" ejaculated his hearer, with a proud toss of the head and face flushing hotly under the rays of the fire. "My hand in marriage! And mother—I never to hear of this, until now?"

"You were at the convent, señorita, and then—Mary Mother called my honored mistress home to rest on her bosom, shortly after."

His voice was hardly audible as the last words were uttered, and for some little time the silence remained unbroken. Each pair of eyes shone mistily as they gazed blankly into the little fire.

Manuel Diaz was the first to rouse up, speaking in low, pleading tones, his gaze fixed wistfully upon the pale face of his young mistress.

"The Donna told me all, nina, before taking her heavenly flight. She begged me, as your oldest, truest, if most humble servant, to watch over, guard and protect her child from the evil ones. I promised—my voice was lost in her sainted ears, save only that of the holy father who granted her absolution. If I have failed to keep that oath—"

"You have not, Tio Manuel," leaning forward to grasp and press his skinny hand warmly. "You have nobly performed that sacred trust."

"Then—you will listen to me, nina? You will believe my words when I say that there is sore and bitter trouble brewing for you? Don Carlos recognized you, this night. He is worthy the evil race from which he sprung; a devil, born and bred!"

"I do not fear him, Manuel!"

"You are a Cagatinta, and fear never yet made their acquaintance," quickly nodded the proud old servant; but his tones grew less certain as he added: "Yet it is no token of fear when one steps aside from the path where a serpent is coiled, its fangs ready to strike. So—I most humbly beg that you will go away from this place, my master! Go back to Mexico, at least until Don Carlos has given over the hunt, or—until a true knife-point can find his black heart!"

"He is but one man, Manuel, though so evil."

"Only one, by himself; yes! But in a country overrun with these heretical Gringos, 'tis easy to pick up an army of devils! And then—our gold is lost, thanks to those cursed cards!"

"You mean well, I know, Tio Manuel," gently, yet firmly, spoke the disguised woman.

"Tis true, the odds seem heavy against us, but I will never turn back while even the ghost of a chance for success remains! 'Tis true, I ventured against your earnest advice, this night. 'Tis only too true that, so venturing, I lost all our gold, but—"

"Permit me to offer you my purse, Señorita Felipa Cagatinta!" came a clear, not unmusical voice at that precise juncture.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### DON CARLOS COVETS A STAR.

As those words reached their ears, both figures near the fire leaped to their feet, springing back of the blazing brands, their faces turned toward the quarter of the ruins from whence that voice proceeded.

A tall, shapely figure stepped out of the shadows into the fire-glow, and even had not his voice betrayed him, Don Carlos Salcedo would have been recognized in that first instant.

With a low, grating curse, Manuel Diaz whipped forth a revolver from the belt about his middle, the dark muzzle leaping to a line with the heart of the bold intruder; but before he could fire, the younger adventurer quickly dropped a hand over the pistol end, crying sternly:

"Hold! wait until I give the word, Manuel Diaz!"

"Good advice, Manuel Diaz," bowed the intruder, a smile curling his pointed mustaches. "Even an old idiot like you can hardly fly in the face of an order delivered by such fair lips!"

"Who are you, sir?" sternly demanded the disguised woman, firmly facing the enemy without a sign of fear or uneasiness for the result.

"Your most humble servant, Señorita Fe—"

"Stop! do I look like a woman, in this garb?" "It takes far more than dress to make a man," laughed Salcedo, his bold eyes running admiringly over the graceful figure, now more fully revealed since the shrouding serape had dropped to the ground when its wearer made that swift leap. "But even were your disguise far more comple, señorita, the eyes of true and faithful love would penetrate it."

If not of love, those dark eyes were full of a good counterfeit of that passion. And with the firelight falling squarely upon his face, Don Carlos Salcedo looked a gallant enough suitor, too.

His figure was not too tall for grace, and his movements were both easy and powerful. His face was handsome, after the Spanish standard, and all that marred his masculine beauty was a discolored lump directly between the eyes, where Manuel Diaz had struck so swift and truly.

His half-mocking gaze was squarely met, then a sneer began to curl the young adventurer's lips, through which issued the words:

"Are you crazy, or merely drunk, sir?"

"Neither the one nor the other," promptly came the reply, in Spanish, though that question was given in English. "I am Carlos Salcedo. You are Felipa del Cagatinta, the star of my dreams, sleeping or waking. For you I have left my country, and—"

"Liar!" harshly interposed the old man, showing his teeth through the shadows. "This is your native land—the land you and your renegade relatives helped place beneath the yoke of the cursed invaders!"

"Silence, Manuel!" frowned his young mistress. "'Tis your place to listen, mine to speak. And you, Don Carlos Salcedo, if that be your rightful name and title, why have you intruded upon me here?"

"To serve you, lady," bowed the other.

"Have I requested your services?"

"In words, no; in needs, yes," with another low bow. "Though you may not fully realize the fact, señorita, great and awful peril is hanging over your defenseless head, which no arm less strong, less devoted than the one I am proud to offer you, can avert."

"I do not recognize you, señor."

"That is my misfortune, not my fault, señorita," smiling, as he repeated that profound bow, hand over heart. "My eyes are keener than yours, lady. I would know you were you to pass over my grave, ten thousand years after my death! You are my idol, my star—"

"Only a fallen star could cast its rays to your level!" coldly, yet angrily retorted the disguised woman.

But Don Carlos was not one to be bluffed so readily. He had come to that spot with the firm intention of having his say out, and with a persistence worthy of a better cause, he took up the thread where those red lips had so abruptly broken it off.

"You are the bright and glorious star, señorita, whose heavenly rays have drawn me over plain and mountain, stream and desert, far from the beautiful home that is only awaiting its mistress, fairest of the fair! Only consent to shine on poor me, my beautiful star, and—"

The intended climax was lost, and twin spots of color leaped into his swarthy cheeks as Felipa broke into a low, mocking, yet amused, laugh at his bombastic heroics, then bowed slightly, while saying:

"I was wrong, and I humbly beg your pardon, Señor Don Carlos Salcedo! You are neither drunk nor crazy; you were born—an idiot!"

For a brief space it was a toss-up whether Don Carlos gave back retort or a blow. He was angry enough for the last, but possibly the certainty that, before his hand could reach its mark, Manuel Diaz would send a bullet through his heart, had something to do with forming his decision.

"You are cruel, señorita," he said, with well assumed dignity, through which ran a touch of sorrow. "You have a right to reject my love, perhaps, but no right to add insult to injury!"

"What you term your love, señor, is an insult in itself," was the haughty reply. "Your presence was not invited here. It is decidedly unwelcome. Pray oblige me by taking your departure."

"Am I such an intruder, then?" showing his white teeth below his carefully waxed mustaches.

"Have I not spoken with sufficient distinctness?"

"I believe this spot is public property, and—"

"This is my property, sir!" impulsively cried the young woman, her dark eyes fairly flashing. "This was the home of my parents, and that it is a ruin now, is mainly owing to your dastardly ancestors!"

Don Carlos laughed with a touch of triumph which he could not, or cared not to, entirely suppress.

"This was the home of Don Marcos del Cagatinta. Don Marcos had but one child: a daughter, named Felipa. Yet—you deny that you are other than what your garb would indicate. Then, how can it be that I am the intruder you term me, my dear—señor?"

"Why listen longer to the dog?" harshly interposed Manuel Diaz, his blood rising to fever heat. "Stand aside, Don Felipe, and permit me to answer him as he deserves!"

"Better still, Señorita Cagatinta," quickly interposed Don Carlos, but without making any move toward touching weapon, though both knife and pistols showed in the belt about his middle. "Since you positively decline to re-



ceive me as a lover, why not listen to me as a friend?"

"If I am she you name, can there be friendship between us?" slowly demanded the young woman. "You, a Salcedo, I, a Cagatinta?"

"Are we our honorable but too hot-blooded fathers? The old feud has slumbered for half a lifetime; why try to fan the dead ashes into devouring flames at this late day? Why not accept the hand of fellowship which is extended far more than half way?"

"Don't listen to the hiss of the serpent, my master. And you, Don Carlos, beware! You bear my mark between your eyes, even now! Take care that I don't blot it out—with a bullet!"

Slipping from the restraining hand of his young mistress—no longer master, since the thin disguise has been lifted—Manuel Diaz brought his revolver to a level with that discolored spot, his finger resting lightly on the trigger.

The red glow in his eyes told only too plainly that he would like nothing better than to put his implied threat into execution, only for fear of offending his mistress.

If he was a coward, Don Carlos did not betray the fact, just then.

He could look squarely into that black muzzle without shifting his eyes. He could see, too, that the old man had a wonderfully steady hand, that his eyes, his face, his whole person betrayed a fierce longing to in part avenge the wrongs his master's family had suffered through the ancestors of this person.

Yet Don Carlos never flinched, and his tones were coldly scornful as he made reply:

"That would be rank murder, Manuel Diaz, since my hands are empty. Yet I will not plead to you, a slave. Only to you, senorita, I will address myself; if you say die—so be it!"

"I do not say so—yet!" was the prompt response; then turning to the old man, she added: "Fall back, Manuel. I will ask for your help when I feel that I am powerless to defend myself. Until then—peace!"

Without a word, with merely a smothered snarl that barely rose to his throat, the faithful old fellow obeyed, though he still held the pistol ready in his grasp, while lowering the hammer.

"What more have you to say, Don Carlos Salcedo?"

"That I wish to prove myself your true friend, senorita," his tones full of respect and seeming sincerity. "That, while deeply regretting your refusal to be my holy star, to shine—"

"I do refuse, once for all!" came the stern interruption. "If you have nothing more important to say than that, you are wasting breath to little avail, Don Salcedo."

"Then I must resign the dearest hope mortal man ever entertained!" with a deep sigh of regret, his head drooping for a brief space; then, rallying as though from a stunning blow, he hurriedly added: "At least I can prove that I am a true friend to you and to your dearest hopes, Senorita Felipa Cagatinta! May I—will you grant me a very few words in private?"

"I have no secrets from my faithful servant, sir," was the cold response.

"I do not ask that you send him out of sight, senorita. I simply beg you to bid him fall back a few paces, so that what I have to say may rest between you and I—unless you see fit and proper to tell your servant, afterward."

The young woman gazed keenly, searchingly into the face of the Californian while he was uttering these words. She sought for some trace of meditated treachery, but in vain. He seemed intent only on her good, else his features were most admirably trained to lie.

After all, what harm could come of complying? Manuel need not pass out of sight, and old though he was, his eyes were keen and his hands steady. Even should she prove unable to protect herself against this man, his arm would be near enough to guard her.

So her brain swiftly reasoned, and with a barely perceptible hesitation, she turned toward Diaz and gave him the desired order.

Without a word he complied, but stood keenly on his guard, grimly resolved to shoot Don Carlos down at the first evil motion.

"You are very kind, senorita—so far!" sighed Don Carlos, clearly gaining fresh courage by that slight yielding to his wishes. "If you could only be as kindly disposed toward—if you would only permit me to tell you how passionately I adore you, the only woman I have ever loved, the one bright particular star which I have so madly coveted ever since I first caught sight—"

"Shall I call my servant back, senor?" coldly said Felipa.

"Then—there is no hope for my love, proud lady?" sighed the love-lorn Californian.

"I would a thousand-fold prefer your bitterest hatred!"

"So your lips say, senorita, but your heart?" quickly whispered the man, his black eyes glittering. "Have you stopped to reckon up what the hatred of such a man as I is worth? Can you even begin to guess how much that might mean?"

"Is this all you had to tell me, senor?"

"For one thing, Felipa del Cagatinta, hatred could set all yonder town of wild and reckless

knaves in a boiling uproar, by simply making known to them the fact that the gambler over whose bold playing all are excited, is—not the lad they imagine, but a most charming damsel, whose daintiest touch of her red lips would outweigh a thousand-fold the value of the gold she poured upon their painted cards! With one word I could set them all on the trail of an angel who—"

"Silence, you dastardly knave!" flashed the young woman, lifting her hand with a passionate gesture. "Manuel, come—"

At the same instant there came a muffled cry to her ears from the rear, and turning, Felipa saw her faithful servant vainly struggling in the grasp of at least two men, a blanket over his head. Then—

"Mine, at last, my glorious star!" cried Salcedo, his arms infolding her.

## CHAPTER IX.

### UNINVITED WITNESSES.

SILVER-TIP STEVE lifted his eyes at that touch and hasty query, but the extended arm obviated the necessity of asking questions on his part. It was only for his eyes to follow that pointing hand, and the cause of that eager interruption was before them.

Below them, as they sat together on the steep hillside, a tiny spark of fire was rapidly growing in height and breadth, even as they gazed interestedly, attaining quite respectable dimensions, and sending forth light sufficient to reveal at least two human figures close beside it.

"Waal, lad," half-laughed the veteran, when this much became clear to them both, "of them critters is spooks, it's the fu'st time I ever knowed they felt the need o' warmin' knees an' fingers at a sure 'nough fire!"

"Yet they're there—at the Haunted Hacienda!"

"Sure!" nodded Silver-tip Steve, at the same time flashing a keen look into the face of his young comrade, half in doubt as to the full meaning of that peculiar tone. "What better place could spooks find fer to hev a quiet racket into? Don't the very name inwite 'em to come in a hurry—eh?"

There was no immediate response. Nash Baldwin stood gazing intently at the little campfire, the ruddy glow of which served to, in a certain measure, throw those gloomy ruins into relief, forming a scene which had an interest of its own, apart from the possibilities suggested by time and place.

"Ef I couldn't kick up a bigger bobbery then they're doin', billy-be-jo-hammered ef I'd play spook fer twicet the wages!" at length muttered the Sky-scraper, in a tone of disgust. "Whar's the sense in bein' a ghost ef ye can't hev a holy heap o' gelorious fun? Any dug-gun mortal fool kin squat front of a fire—like that!"

Nash Baldwin gave a slight start at the snort of real or assumed disgust which followed those words. He glanced toward his relative, then slowly spoke:

"What do you reckon they're up to, Uncle Steve?"

"Warmin' tha'r shins, from the looks. Ef my younger eddication hain't gone clean back onto the old man, that's the blaze of a fire the two eyes o' me is ketchin', down yen' way, sonny."

"Why have they picked out such a place as that for a camp?"

"Waal, mebbe they're partial to houses, lad. Mebbe you won't put no 'pendence in what I say, but ef that's the rightful how, 'twouldn't be the fu'st time I've knowed human critters to live in a house when thar was all the rest o' outdoors fer to pick an' choose from."

It was not often that Stephen Hurst deliberately acted the simpleton when there was naught to be gained from it, but this was an exceptional occasion. For a couple of hours past he had been forced to deal with sentiment of the strongest nature, to unvail the long-buried past and lay bare his still sore scars. True, he had a loyal, sympathetic audience of one, but that hardly lessened the painful strain. Now—he sought the relief that lay nearest to hand.

"Whoever they are, Uncle Steve, they're not afraid of the ghosts which are popularly credited with haunting those ruins," slowly added Baldwin, apparently divining the cause of that abrupt change in the manner of the veteran of two wars. "See how they lean toward each other! See how they gesticulate! One would almost believe they were talking about—can it be a buried treasure, Uncle Steve?"

As he pronounced the last words, Baldwin held up a warning hand, but the caution was hardly necessary. True, Silver-tip Steve gave a quick start at the suggestion, but he was far too experienced to do aught that might convey an alarm to others, even though those others might be a great deal closer at hand than the two strangers sitting near the little blaze kindled amid the ruins below.

The Sky-scraper rose to his feet in silence, one hand slowly smoothing his peculiar beard as he gazed intently across the space separating them from the ruined hacienda. It seemed as though he was trying to recognize the strangers, though even keener eyes would have found the

task an impossible one, at more than half a mile distance.

"What's your opinion, Uncle Steve?" at length ventured Baldwin. "Is my notion too far out of the way?"

"It don't call fer much wind to say yes or no, lad, but when it comes to provin' the one or t'other, that's a gray hoss of a dif'rent color. An' so—mebbe ye're right, an' mebbe ye're wrong."

"Clear as mud, and almost as valuable!" laughed the young man, in no wise put out by the answer to his question. "But don't you reckon it's worth investigating a little further?"

"Waal, mebbe thar's reason 'nough for one, but too mighty little fer to go 'round 'mongst two," deliberately granted the Sky-scraper, keeping his gaze steadily on the figures by the fire. "An' so—ef you'll take a squat, an' stay right hyar, sonny, why—"

"That settles it! I'm going with you, Uncle Steve!" declared Nash, with a positive nod of his shapely head.

"But I said—"

"And by so saying, prove that you really believe there is danger in trying to get at those fellows down yonder," coolly interposed the younger man, a gentle touch of his hand apologizing for his seeming rudeness. "I enlisted for the war, remember, Uncle Steve, and I'm not going to begin shirking at the very first."

"You mean it, boy?"

"Shoulder to shoulder, Uncle Steve! If there's anything calling you down yonder, it pronounces my name in the same breath."

"All right!" with an emphatic nod. "Ef you'd 'a' showed up any dif'rent, dug-gun ef I hedn't turned to and licked ye wuss'n ye ever ketched it at school, in crooked-pin times! Bet yer sweet life, honey!"

"I knew it, and so guided myself accordingly," laughed Baldwin, long since grown accustomed to these abrupt changes. "Now—what are the marching orders, General Hurst?"

"Waal, you've set 'em up in to'able plain type, your own self, Nash," with a short, grim chuckle. "'Stead o' rollin' up in our blankets an' takin' our reg'lar rations o' sleep, we're to mosey down the hill an' play spy onto them two gents squatin' by their own fireside. An' you've got to do the blushin' fer all two both on us, lad, ef they pan out pure quill."

He spoke jestingly, but Nash Baldwin was sober enough in his reply.

"I haven't any proof to back me up, Uncle Steve, but—something warns me that those fellows are mixed up with the treasure we've come so far to find!"

"Does it look 'tall reas'nable, lad?"

"If it did, uncle, maybe I'd be slower to put faith in it."

"Like the heft o' human critters, anyway," chuckled Silver-tip Steve, pausing to inspect his pistols before making a positive move.

His example was followed by Nash Baldwin, and then, taking care not to disturb any of the stones with which the hillside was plentifully bestrewn, the two men began their advance upon the ruined hacienda and the two strangers who had shown such odd taste in their choice of a camping place.

Neither man spoke. Each had a half-ashamed feeling. Not at the act of playing spy alone, but rather because they were about to do so with no better excuse than the one Nash Baldwin had offered.

What was there in the actions of those strangers to indicate that they had aught to do with the object which led uncle and nephew to journey so far from their comfortable home?

Nothing!

But neither man was one to turn back from an object without doing his level best to satisfy or win it, and so, moving as guardedly as though stealing upon the camp of a strong force of declared enemies, discovery by whom meant certain death, they left the hill behind them, crossing the stretch of level valley, seeking to gain the ruins without alarming the strangers beside the campfire.

They were still some little distance from the ruined wall, when Silver-tip Steve suddenly checked his comrade, giving a warning hiss that betokened danger ahead.

"Stiddy, lad!" the veteran breathed in Baldwin's ear as they sunk low upon the ground. "I sighted a two-legged critter over yender, actin' like he wanted to see what was gwine on in them pile o' rocks, same as we'uns!"

"That goes to prove there's something worth finding out, anyway!" said Nash, in the same guarded tones. "You lead. I'll follow."

Keen though his eyes were, the young man had failed to note aught suspicious, nor could he now; but having perfect faith in the veteran, he knew he was safe in making that decision.

After a brief period of waiting, Silver-tip Steve resumed his advance, slightly altering his course, the more surely to escape detection by the skulking figure of which he had caught merely a glimpse.

They gained the ruined wall without making any further discovery, but before they secured a position from whence they could win a fair view of the strangers who had shown such peculiar taste in their choice of a camping-place,



Don Carlos Salcedo had surprised the Californians, as detailed in another place.

Under cover of the scene which followed, it was no difficult matter for the two spies to steal nearer, finally reaching a position among the ruins from whence they could see all that took place near the little fire, while there was scant danger of their own presence being discovered.

At first it was little better than an enigma to both uncle and nephew, but, as a further interchange of words took place, light began to steal upon them both, and when they understood beyond a doubt that "Don Felipe" was in reality a young woman, Silver-tip Steve felt it no more than prudence required to grip an arm of his youthful comrade in warning.

"Stiddy, lad!" he whispered, softly, his bearded lips close to Baldwin's ear. "We didn't come this fur to mix up in a row 'long of a stranger gal!"

"But—listen to that sneering cur!"

"I be a-listenin' with all o' my ears, but that don't hinder me from 'peatin' of it all over ag'in, lad. Han's off, an' let them do all the talkin', I tell ye!"

His fingers closed with a stern grip, and Baldwin obeyed. Still, Silver-tip Steve could feel his muscles quivering and twitching beneath his hand, and he felt that he had his work cut out for him.

Just because yonder stripling was a woman!

So the veteran told himself, with an inward sneer, forgetful of his own ardent youth when—or was it because he remembered only too well?

With steadily growing interest the comrades listened and watched, and at least one of them found time to wonder if the treasure to which vague allusions were made, had aught in common with the "rich strike" which unfortunate Theodore Baldwin had made, so many long years ago?

He was not allowed to reason the matter out, for he felt, rather than saw, that Nash Baldwin was losing his temper over the conduct of Don Carlos Salcedo, and it was no part of his present plans to become mixed up in an ugly row.

As a matter of course, his sympathy leaned toward the young woman, if only for her brave stand against yonder serpentish fellow with the smooth tongue; but he could not bring himself to believe her peril was sufficient to justify him in openly interfering.

She was a woman. The man openly avowed his love for her. And even should that passion lead him to overstep the limit of decency, surely Manuel Diaz could protect his young mistress?

Even as those reflections were turned over in his busy brain, Silver-tip Steve caught a faint sound not far from their place of hiding, and turned his head just in time to witness that assault upon Diaz by two stout knaves, doubtless acting under the orders of Salcedo!

Quick as thought his broad palm closed forcibly over the mouth of his nephew, just in time to smother the angry ejaculation which greeted the next movement of the renegade Californian.

## CHAPTER X.

### DON CARLOS MAKES AN OFFER.

WITH a laugh that showed how confident he was of success, Don Carlos took full advantage of the opportunity offered him by that luckless turning, and before Felipa could fairly realize the trap into which they had both fallen, his strong arms were about her form, holding her helpless despite her desperate struggles to break away.

"The fates will it so, my angel!" triumphantly cried the villain, dexterously relieving her belt of the weapons they supported, while easily overcoming her efforts to escape. "On my honor, I mean you no harm, senorita!"

"Your honor? Dog! renegade! cowardly traitor!" panted Felipa, indignation seemingly depriving her of strength to continue that vain struggle.

"My angel! my star! my idol!" mocked the knave, releasing his grasp, stepping back a pace and tossing the weapons into the darkness behind him.

Felipa staggered when set free, but quickly recovering her powers in a measure, she half turned toward her servant; to see him lying at the feet of his captors, securely muffled in a blanket, with a lariat wound in many folds about his body.

"If you prefer their arms to mine, senorita, flee unto them!" said Don Carlos, with a sneering laugh, folding his arms and making no move to restrain her flight.

As the girl saw all this, an abrupt change came over her manner. With Manuel Diaz helpless, with three strong men to cope with, herself deprived of all weapons, flight or fight seemed entirely out of the question. Only one course seemed open to her, and that she took.

Proudly facing the Californian, her voice even as it was cold, she demanded:

"What is your next dastardly move, Don Carlos Salcedo?"

"To convince you that I am what I claimed: your best, truest friend, Senorita Felipa del Cagatinta," bowed the Californian, hand over heart.

"If a friend, why act so like an enemy?"

"Because you would have it so, senorita," a smile coming into his swarthy face. "Because you would not hear what I had to say, in peace."

"You were so sure of my refusal that you brought along yonder ladrones to back your prayers?" her proud head indicating the two grinning rascals standing just without the little circle of firelight.

"Why not?" retorted Salcedo, gingerly tapping the discolored spot between his eyes with the tip of a finger. "Did I not receive this gentle token, simply for speaking to you, back yonder in town?"

"If it had only been the point, instead!" panted Felipa.

"If it had been the point, then yonder riata would be noosed about the throat of Manuel Diaz, instead of wound about his carcass, senorita! Instead of guarding a live captive, my gentle fellows would be drinking a safe and swift passage to the soul of a corpse!"

"They have murdered poor Manuel, as it is!"

"Have you blundered so awkwardly, men?" called out Salcedo, with a nod in that direction.

"We don't do business that way, boss," replied one of the knaves. "You said fer to take him alive, an' he's done tuck. Jest tickle him 'ith the toe o' yer huff, pardner!"

"Squarm, ye pesky critter!" grunted his mate, vigorously applying the remedy suggested.

"Let yer purty boss know thar's life left—don't he wiggle mightily like a livin' pusson, boss?" breaking off with a coarse laugh, as Manuel Diaz made a vigorous effort to break away.

"That will do, men," nodded their present master. "Pick him up and carry him out of sight and earshot. This young gentleman and I wish to converse in private."

"Harm him, and a thousand deaths shall be your portion!" sternly cried Felipe, lifting a hand of warning.

"Do him no harm, unless he tries to break away," coldly added Don Carlos. "If he should, the penalty be his own! Go, now, but remain within the hearing of my voice in case I should require your services. You comprehend?"

"Bet yer sweet life, boss!" grunted the shorter of the pair, then stooping to aid his gaunt comrade in lifting the muffled form from the ground.

Felipa made no attempt to follow after. She knew that such an effort would be worse than useless. Her physical powers were no match for the athletic Californian's, and even could she avoid his grasp, she would certainly be intercepted by one or both of those ruffians.

If she had been left even a knife, the case would have been different, but Don Carlos had done his work thoroughly in disarming her, she could hardly have recovered knife or pistol from where they had been tossed, before his strong grip would again fasten upon her form.

Swinging their helpless burden between them, the two ruffians moved away from the lighted space, and until they were entirely lost sight of, neither man nor woman broke the silence.

Then, his tones subdued and full of real or seeming respect, Don Carlos spoke:

"I am not ready to have those fellows learn all about the lost bonanza, senorita, hence my orders. But I pledge you my honor that no harm shall come to your servant, unless his fair young mistress will leave me no other alternative."

"Your honor!" with intense scorn filling every note as her dark eyes flashed upon his swarthy face. "A noble pledge, truly!"

"Such as it is, senorita, you ought to make the best of it. His life and your safety have no other safeguard, this night!"

Her angry flush faded from her cheeks, but no other token of fear or uneasiness did the maiden betray. Proud and haughty as ever, she faced her unscrupulous enemy, awaiting the end.

"Be wise, and you have naught to fear, senorita," with a return of his gentle, respectful manner. "Though you affect to scorn me, you can not forget that I am a Salcedo."

"You are wasting breath, senor. I could pronounce your name, simply by recalling your actions, for only a Salcedo would or could be guilty of such thoroughly vile conduct!"

"You will have it so, then?" his voice growing harder, his dark eyes catching a reddish light that was not wholly a reflection of the fire-glow. "Very well, senorita! Be it so! I will try to forget what lies beneath those garments, and treat with you in accordance with the garb you have assumed."

"Do so, senor. And let your words be as few as possible."

"Few or many, you have no choice but to hear me out," nodded the Californian, deftly rolling a cigarette and stooping for a brand by which to ignite the tobacco. "And, to begin with, let me assure you that I know just why you have come so far from the home across the great river."

"The simple fact that you, a Salcedo, breathed the air of Mexico, was surely sufficient to drive me, a Cagatinta, to another or less polluted country!"

"You are a woman, and her weapon is the tongue," placidly retorted Salcedo, sending twin streams of scented vapor through his flexible nostrils. "I know that I am meeting you at a

sad disadvantage, on that ground; still, I may be able to hold my own for a time. And so—now to business!"

"As I hinted, I know why you are here, and in disguise. I know what important object brought you so far from your Mexican home. More: I can foil your dearest hopes, or I can aid you to carry them to full fruition, just as I—or you, rather!—may elect!"

Outwardly calm and undaunted, Felipa listened to these sentences, her pale features showing neither curiosity nor apprehension.

Naturally brave and strong-nerved, she had rallied from the first shock, and was doing her best to divine some method of effectually turning the tables, not only on Salcedo but on his ruffianly followers as well.

Already she fancied she could see a hope of foiling this arch-villain, but she could not leave Manuel Diaz behind to pay the penalty for both. She must temporize until her desperate scheme could be amended to include his escape as well.

"You must speak still plainer, senor, if you wish me to fully comprehend your meaning," she said, after a brief pause.

"Very well, senorita. I'll try to do so. And first—your father once owned this place, and—"

"It belongs to my father's family still!"

"You would find many more than ready to dispute your claims, senorita, I'm thinking," with a short laugh. "Still, be it so. Flight from California did not deprive your sainted father of his property rights, we will say. But this hacienda—ruined, now, but then a magnificent palace!—was not the only species of valuable property which Don Marcos was forced to leave behind him in the dark hour of flight."

"Who caused that darkness, senor? Who but your renegade family!" hotly flashed the maiden, unable to wholly smother her anger.

"They followed their ideas of right, just as your honored father acted by the light given him," was the cold, even response. "But neither you nor I can afford to quarrel over that point. I am speaking of the treasure in gold and jewels and precious plate, which Don Marcos buried in the earth before he took to flight."

"That treasure has never been reclaimed, though so many long years have rolled by since that memorable day. That treasure still lies in the earth, awaiting a claimant. And—only one man is now drawing the breath of life who helped hide that treasure from the light of day!"

He paused, as though expecting a reply of some sort. None such was offered. With arms folded across her bosom, Felipa waited, her dark eyes steadily fixed upon his face, her brain actively at work.

"That man is Manuel Diaz, now a helpless captive in the hands of my trusted ladrones, senorita! Have you naught to say?"

"If Manuel Diaz is the sole custodian of such a valuable secret, senor, be sure you will never be any the wiser for his knowledge!"

Don Carlos laughed, softly, sneeringly, his dark eyes glittering.

"You are strangely slow of comprehension this evening, senorita! I said Manuel Diaz was the only man now living who helped to bury that immense treasure, not that he alone could point out the golden grave! Quite a difference, as you will admit, my bright star!"

"Do you mean that you have that knowledge, Don Carlos?" coolly asked Felipa, her red lips beginning to curl with amused scorn.

"You are evading the question, woman-like, senorita! Very well. Permit me to make use of the same ambiguity, and—let your thoughts go back to Hard Cash, to the Mint, and what took place within its walls this evening."

"Have you done this? Good! Now—why were you so extremely anxious to win the Mint? Why wager double its utmost value on the turning of a single card?"

"You say I am a woman. Why not call it a woman's whim, senor?"

"Because that would be a lie, and we are dealing strictly with truth, senorita," bowing low, with a mocking smile on his dark face. "I can offer a much better reason, and this is it: why not say that the Cagatinta treasure was buried at or near the spot where now stands the gambling saloon?"

His black eyes were riveted keenly upon that face as he spoke, but it remained totally unmoved. His shot had missed its mark, and he was quick to realize as much, shaping his course accordingly.

"That is enough to prove I can be a valuable ally, senorita, and now I come to the meat of this interview: I love you, as mortal woman was never loved before by man! I have sworn a solemn oath that you shall become my bride, by fair means or by foul!"

"Accept my suit, become my wife, and I will insure your recovering the Cagatinta treasure. On the other hand—refuse my offer, and I will spread your story broadcast throughout all California! I will set ten thousand gold-hungry ruffians on your track, to dog your every step, to foil your dearest hopes—if nothing worse befalls you!"

He broke off abruptly, for a smothered cry came from out the darkness.



## CHAPTER XI.

## MAKING A CLEAN SWEEP.

HOLDING his hand in place, Silver-tip Steve rapidly breathed a warning in the ear of his nephew, even while himself sympathizing with the young woman in the masculine garb.

"They've got the bulge onto us, the way things is 'vided up," he added, barely above a whisper, his keen eyes roving swiftly from maiden to servant, noting each movement made by their captors. "Hold stiddy, as y' were, an' mebbe we'll let the p'izen critters hear somethin' drop afore they're good-an'-ready!"

He took time to look into the eyes of his nephew, and Nash Baldwin looked back his submission. An athlete himself, the young man felt himself little better than a child in those powerful hands.

"It's on parole, ye mind, boy!" whispered Silver-tip Steve, then taking his broad palm away. "Do all the lookin' an' listenin' ye know how, but let *them* do the talkin'. Git that through ye?"

"Unless the whelp tries to use violence—yes!" whispered back the young man, a trace of sulkiness mingling with his submission.

"It's chin-music he wants most, an' I never yit hear'n of a woman that talkin' ever hurt, sonny!" grimly muttered the veteran, still with eyes and ears divided between the two parties beyond and below.

Nash Baldwin caught his breath sharply as Felipa so boldly faced her enemy, and even the cooler-blooded Sky-scraper gave a silent nod of approval.

No man living could better appreciate "pure grit" than Silver-tip Steve, and only for his burning desire to hear more about the subject which this tall Californian likewise seemed interested in, he would have cheered Felipa most heartily.

"Stiddy, lad!" he whispered in guarded tones as Don Carlos bade his tools remove their prisoner. "Things is comin' 'round to our side, jest as smooth as though they was greased fer the 'casion! Now—all ears open, boy!"

The result hardly justified his anticipation, however, and Sky-scraper added the weight of his disappointment to the disgust with which he had long since begun to regard the unmanly Californian.

He had heard just enough concerning a hidden treasure, to ardently long for more definite information. It could hardly be possible that this "bonanza" was the "rich strike" made by Theodore Baldwin, so many long years before; and yet—could there be *two* such treasures awaiting recovery, in the same neighborhood?

"The foul cur!" breathed Baldwin, fairly trembling with anger as he lay watching and listening. "Take back my parole, Uncle Steve, or I'll break it into a thousand pieces!"

"It sorter riles me up, my own self, lad!" nodded the Sky-scraper, taking a cautious glance in the direction where they had lost sight of Manuel Diaz and his captors.

"I'll jump the hound, if you don't, uncle!"

"Stiddy, I tell ye, critter!" his muscular fingers gripping an arm as the young man stirred uneasily. "That's a right way 's well's a wrong 'un, an' jest as easy to foller, lettin' 'lone it's bein' mighty sight safer! You'd make a jump fer his back, mebbe?"

"I'd down him—and that in a holy hurry!"

"Mebbe ye would, an' mebbe, ag'in, you'd git downed, fer keeps, lad," with a short, grim chuckle that sounded hardly louder than his breath. "You've eyes an' feelin's only fer him—an' her; but what 'bout the two toughs settin' onto the old Greaser?"

"We can manage them all, if—"

"Ef we do the startin' in as we'd orter. But while you was jumpin' him, they'd be pumpin' lead into ye, too quick fer any sort o' use. So—hold the breath o' ye, lad, an' watch how I'm settin' a sample fer you to do the copyin' of!"

Without even a rustle or a scraping of clothes against rocks to betray the fact, Silver-tip Steve backed away from their post of observation taking a course that would not carry them into view of the spot where the two toughs held Manuel Diaz in captivity, nor yet where a ray of the little fire could betray their presence to Don Carlos.

Now that it looked as though something was about to be done, on the part of innocence against guilt, Baldwin felt his irritated nerves grow cool and steady once more, and he at once followed the example set him by the veteran.

Although they were in darkness, save for the rays of the moon, here partially intercepted by the higher portions of the ruins, both men effected their retreat without sound sufficient to attract attention from the most suspicious.

When fairly out of sight of the man and woman standing near the fire in the rock-strewn patio, Silver-tip Steve came to a halt, letting Baldwin creep up alongside, then guardedly whispering:

"It's a heap sight safer talkin' out hyar, sonny, an' afore we go any furdur, mebbe we'd best lay the lines out, c'lar an' plain. What's the plan o' battle, anyway?"

"Puttin' a stop to that black-mugged ras-

cal's insolence, of course!" was the instant response.

Silver-tip Steve laughed softly, helping himself nod by giving a vigorous tug at his white and black beard.

"I knowed it! An' ef that gal was the boy she tried to play, you wouldn't be one-hafe as 'dignant; now, would ye, lad?"

"Even a boy could better defend himself, and—"

"That's all right, Nash," nodded his uncle, with a quick change of tone and manner. "I'm with ye in this, from top to bottom. All I wanted to show ye was how much difference it makes whether a man is old or young. All you kin see or think of is the gal, an' I ain't doubtin' a mite but what you'd git her out all right. But how much would it cost?"

"I don't catch on, Uncle Steve!"

"You'd jump *him*, an' they'd jump *you*. That'd be shootin', an' mebbe cuttin' an' slashin'. You'd come out top o' the heap, fer that's the natur' o' the Baldwin breed; but—would it pay?"

"Would it pay any better to leave a lady in such evil clutches?" frowned the young man, with an impatient glance in the direction of the hidden fire.

"We'll fetch her out safe 'nough, lad, never you fear. All I want is to settle fu'st-off jest which is the proper way fer to work the oracle. One thing's mighty sure: your scheme ain't it!"

"Then lay the lines yourself, uncle," whispered Baldwin, giving another uneasy glance across the ruins as the sound of voices came floating to their ears, though no words could be distinguished. "That devil may break loose—for Heaven's sake! show me the way to take! While we're idling, she may be—"

"Stiddy, I tell ye, once more, Nash Baldwin!" hissed Silver-tip, his grip tightening until pain caused his nephew to wince. "All I'm holdin' back fer is to git your nerves settled down, so you kin act on a cool head's advice. An' right here we'll stick, ontel you begin to show signs of 'provement in that line—we jest *will*, now!"

When Silver-tip Steve assumed that dogged manner, Nash Baldwin knew there was no shaking his resolution. With an effort he steadied himself, then squarely faced those glowing eyes, saying evenly:

"Steady has it, Uncle Steve! Tell me just what to do, and I'll hold my end level. I give you the Baldwin word to that, sir!"

"Which is heap sight better'n an oath tuck on any other name!" muttered the veteran of two wars, with a nod of grim satisfaction. "The fu'st thing is to find out jest whar those twoimps hev set down onto the old Greaser."

Baldwin gave a nod in the required direction.

"I know that's the course, but thar's the doin', after findin' of 'em. Ef shootin' or cuttin' wasn't clean barred, that would be easy'nough, but nothin' short o' savin' life 'll jestify our takin' of it. See?"

"I'm waiting for orders, sir."

"Hyar they be, then, lad. We'll make out ther exact persition, fu'st. Then we'll jump 'em from ahind, ef sech a thing is to be did. We'll knock 'em in the head—not hard 'nough to kill, but too hard fer 'em to yelp out loud 'nough fer the critter over yen' way to hear. You foller, so fur, lad?"

"What with, our pistols?"

"No ye don't, boy! Sech a club 'll answer when they hain't no other way to git out of a tight place, but that's all. Fu'st, thar's the resk o' jarrin' off a ca'tridge! Second, thar's the chainece o' bendin' the frame so ye *cain't* shoot ef the time comes when ye *hev* to! So—tie a dornick up in yer han'ker, an' spit on the grip of it fer luck!"

Silver-tip Steve picked out a suitable stone for that purpose, and handing it to Nash, sought another for himself. The rude weapons were quickly arranged, and then, with Silver-tip in the lead, they stole silently along to make out the enemy's position as the next move.

This was not a very difficult matter to accomplish, with an old hand at scouting, like Silver-tip Steve, taking the lead. The ground, too, was very favorable, affording an abundance of cover for those who felt the need of secrecy.

This was hardly the case with the fellows in charge of Manuel Diaz. They had no reason to suspect the vicinity of enemies, in that ill-omened spot, and at that hour of the night.

Believing none others save their leader and his especial captive were nigh, the ruffians had selected a spot where the moonlight rendered surrounding objects less ghostly, squatting down near their muffled and bound captive, smoking their pipes and talking together while waiting for a summons from their chief.

Silver-tip Steve paused as he caught his first glimpse of the guards, sinking lower and signing for Nash Baldwin to draw up alongside him.

"Thar they be, lad," he whispered, softly, his keen eyes taking note of all surroundings, searching for the best point from whence to make their attack. "They hain't reckonin' on trouble, though I could wish they hedn't picked out quite so much moonsbine fer to do tha'r chinnin' by."

"There's cover near enough so we can reach

them at a jump or two, Uncle Steve," murmured the young man.

"I know it. An' ef they don't glimpse us too soon, an' ef we make the fu'st lick do its full duty, an' they don't nothin' else turn—Hist! listen, boy!"

Silver-tip checked himself abruptly, catching a word or two from one of the ruffians they were spying upon.

"I tell ye, Dave Terry, I'm gwine fer to hev a finger into that bonanza, boss or no boss! I tell ye—"

"An' I tell *you*, Joe Bisbing, shet trap!" growled the gaunt guard, angrily. "Ef the boss was to ketch onto our knowin' more'n he wants, salt won't save you—nur me, nuther! So shet trap!"

A sulky grunt was his only answer, and as silence fell upon them both, Silver-tip Steve gave his comrade the signal to advance.

Quickly gaining the nearest point practicable, Silver-tip signed to Baldwin to take the shorter ruffian, then they darted forward, striking hard and swift, taking the ruffians completely by surprise.

The one selected by Silver-tip Steve fell without cry or struggle, knocked senseless in an instant, but Baldwin did not fare so well, though his intentions were just as good.

His man tumbled over before the blow, but a smothered cry escaped his lips, loud enough to reach the ears of those by the fire, as Silver-tip promptly realized.

"Down him! Guard 'em, boy, while I tend to t'other critter!" he swiftly spoke, leaping across the moonlighted space and heading for the patio at top speed.

None too rapid were his movements, for Felipa, catching that cry, and believing her faithful servant was being murdered by his guards, turned to save or share his fate, while Don Carlos, with a savage oath, sprung after her with outstretched hands.

To meet the iron fist of Silver-tip Steve, the sturdy blow sending him flying back, fairly lifted clear off his feet!

## CHAPTER XII.

## UNCOMFORTABLE SUSPICIONS.

FELIPA sprung to one side with a broken scream as that hairy figure came into the patio, but before she could do more, the veteran caught her about the waist, hastily saying:

"It's all right, ma'am, an' we're your best fri'nds! Ef ye don't b'lieve it, take a look at that sprawlin' critter, thar!"

"You are—Manuel!"

"An' he's all hunky, too, ma'am," hastily assured Silver-tip Steve, keeping his arm about the startled maiden despite her struggles, more to keep her from injury by aimless flight than because he liked the position, however. "We jest knocked the guards in the head, an'—see ef *you* cain't fetch her to her senses, lad!" drawing a great breath of relief as Nash Baldwin came hurrying on the scene.

Was it because Baldwin was a really handsome young fellow, that Felipa ceased her vain struggles the instant she caught sight of his face? Either that, or else the words of the older man had found a way through the mists that had briefly clouded her brain.

"Tell her all how it come so, lad, while I go set the old feller free, an' tend to t'others," hastily added Hurst, moving away toward the spot where the first blow had been dealt.

It was rather odd that such an experienced fighter should have temporarily forgotten Don Carlos, but such was the fact. Possibly it was because so many years had passed over his head since his arms had encircled a woman!

Be that as it may, Silver-tip Steve hurried away without a glance at or thought of the villain who had gone down before his honest fist.

"Let *him* do the huggin' ef it's got to be did!" he muttered, with a grim chuckle rising in his throat. "An' I'm bettin' dollars ag'in cents that the pritty don't kick an' squarm nigh so lively as she did when I was 'bracin' of her—waal, now, I jest *am*!"

Silver-tip Steve found Dave Terry and Joe Bisbing lying just as they had fallen, looking more like dead men than living. But he knew from experience what hard knocks men of their class can endure without completely going under, and his first move was to strip their belts of all weapons, throwing the cartridges out of the revolvers, then casting the lot in between two rocks, where the shadows lay deepest.

While thus occupied, he saw Manuel Diaz twisting and writhing in a vain attempt to free himself from blanket and *riata*, and he said:

"It's all right, pardner! I'll unwind ye in a minute, fer that rope 'll come in mighty handy fer to truss up these pesky imps with. An' you'll find your young—your boss right side up, too!"

The weapons disposed of, it took only a few moments for Hurst to loosen the rope, and leaving Manuel to complete his freedom as best he might, Silver-tip cut the *riata* into suitable lengths, using them to bind the two ruffians, hand and foot.

He worked rapidly, and with a skill that told this was not his maiden attempt in that direc-



tion; but the task was hardly half finished when a pistol-shot rung out upon the cool night air, coming from the court-yard where he had left his nephew and the fair stranger!

"That devil!" gasped Silver-tip Steve, his brain turning dizzy and his heart sick for a single breath, as he realized his mistake—Heaven grant it had not proved a fatal one!"

Jerking forth a revolver, giving the mighty roar which had in part won for him that grisly title, the Sky-scraper, Silver-tip rushed toward the spot, stopping short for an instant as he saw Nash Baldwin falling to the earth, but with Don Carlos beneath him!

Another rush, a terrible grip closing about the throat of the renegade Californian, whose life would surely have paid the forfeit only for the hasty assurance given the enraged giant by his nephew:

"I'm all right—thanks to the lady!" came the most welcome words. "She saved my life—he caught me off my guard, and shot before I knew he was sensible."

That terrible grip had left its subject senseless once more, brief though it had been. But Silver-tip Steve was taking no more chances, and while Manuel Diaz, little the worse for his captivity, was hastily explaining matters to his still bewildered mistress, Don Carlos, flung like a sack of meal over one powerful shoulder, was borne by the giant to where his men were lying, just beginning to rally from the heavy blows they had received.

Nash Baldwin, after a hasty word of thanks to the disguised woman, followed his uncle, lending a hand in binding the evil trio, at the same time more fully explaining how he had escaped the shot aimed at his life by the desperate Californian.

"I was trying to convince her—the lady—that we were her friends, you know, Uncle Steve. Somehow, I didn't give a thought to that villain, for—"

"Didn't hev 'nough to go 'round; jes' s'!" grunted the giant, with a fleeting glance into that handsome face—a warmly flushed face it was, too, just then.

"She caught sight of him, as he partly rose, with a gun in his grip, and pushed me back—none to soon, either, God bless her!" lifting his hat with an almost reverential fervor. "The bullet brushed my cheek, and *did* bite my ear a little I believe," at the same time feeling of the member indicated, the bright moonlight showing a trace of blood on his fingers, after.

"Jest a graze—you won't know 'twas ever thar in a couple o' days," said Hurst, making a quick examination. "Wish't I could feel assure you'd fergit all other hurts as soon, lad!"

"You mean—hist!" as the sound of footsteps came to their ears. "They're coming—don't say anything—"

"Jest the Greaser," grunted Silver-tip Steve, completing his task by giving the final knot a spiteful jerk that drew a gasp of pain from the lungs of Don Carlos. "All right with your boss, pardner?"

"All right, blessed be the saints! And thanks to you, most noble senors!" bowed Manuel, the concluding sentence plainly coming as an afterthought.

"That's hearty, anyway! Ketch hold—you two tote yen' fat critter back in the rocks. Stow him whar he can't do any wrastlin' to speak of, an' then stop his jaws with a gob o' ary thing as 'll s'arve fer a gag. Work lively, lads!"

While speaking, Silver-tip Steve was working. He shaped a gag and tied it in place, then caught up Don Carlos and bore him away into the darkness, quickly returning to serve Dave Terry after the same fashion.

Each ruffian was stowed away by himself, out of sight of his fellows, and where the shifting moonlight would not soon reveal their hiding-places.

"Fer we've got to skin out o' this, lively, ye want to know!" the old soldier hastily explained, when the three men once more came together. "It's long odds that thar'll be some pesky critters moseyin' up from town, to smell out ther hull meanin' of that onlucky shot. Ef they do, and happen to stumble onto them dug-gun critters—waal, ef they ain't huntin' fer the lot o' us next minute, 'twon't be fer lack o' turrible hard lyin' out o' the jaws we jest stopped!"

By this time, both Felipa and Diaz had become convinced that they had fallen in with honest friends, and neither showed any positive reluctance to bear them company, after Silver-tip Steve thoroughly scattered the remnant of the camp-fire, leaving only the moonbeams to illumine the ruins.

"It'll be heap sight safer up yender on the hill, then down in the walley," said Silver-tip, leading the way in that direction, with seeming carelessness slipping a hand through the arm of the old Californian, briskly leading the way toward the point from whence they had caught their first glimpse of the fire kindled amid the ruins.

Manuel Diaz turned his face toward his young mistress, but she was listening to the low, eager tones of Nash Baldwin, her eyes downcast.

So, with a smothered sigh, the old man meekly

submitted—and he such an inveterate hater of all Americans!

Stephen Hurst was not talking solely for the benefit of the man he addressed, while giving a brief explanation of how they had happened so opportunely at the Haunted Hacienda. He meant that Felipa should be in no doubt as to the knowledge they had won of her real sex, hoping that by so doing he would find her less reticent when he came to ask her the questions which were already being shaped in his busy brain.

He must learn more of this buried treasure, for uncomfortable suspicions were growing within him; suspicions that were almost a disagreeable certainty, too!

Although, as indicated in another place, Theodore Baldwin had written with annoying vagueness concerning the precise nature of his "rich strike," in those long-ago days, he had said enough that careful study made it almost certain his "find" had come in the shape of buried treasure, not in a golden "pocket," such as at rare intervals rewarded the lucky prospector.

And since that treasure had been so valuable that he feared to attempt its transportation without the aid of his sworn chum: since the rude chart found among the papers left by his wife, at her death, almost certainly indicated that very neighborhood as the hiding-place of the treasure; what more likely than that the two treasures were but one and the same?

From long brooding over the subject, and many a long hour spent in trying to solve the secret of the map, Silver-tip Steve had come to regard it as his sacred duty to unearth the lost bonanza, turning it over to the sole surviving descendant of that chum. Now—if this young woman could clearly prove her right to the bonanza—but at that point Stephen Hurst doggedly stopped short.

It was not a long journey from the ruins to the hillside, but by the time it was completed, the younger couple had reached an excellent understanding, to judge from appearances.

Silver-tip Steve scowled grimly as he was forced to reach this conclusion on hearing his nephew address the seeming youth as Felipa, and catching her low, musical voice reply with his given name!

He never once gave a thought to what might have struck a less misanthropical woman-hater; how amicable that disputed treasure might be divided between the young couple, yet neither one be any the poorer for the division!

"I reckon we're safe 'nough at this pitch, critters," said Hurst, as they gained the camp which the two men had deserted to investigate the inmates of the Haunted Hacienda. "Thar don't 'pear to be anybody hustlin' out o' town, so I reckon they never ketched onto that shot. So—Kin I hev a word or two with you, Miss Flippy?"

"With pleasure, sir!" bowed Felipa, though showing a little shrinking as well as surprise at that blunt address.

"Thank ye, ma'am," stiffly bowing in return. "I don't reckon thar's any need o' my tellin' ye what we see'd and hearn, down yender? That starched-up Greaser called ye by name an' natur' too plain fer makin' any mistake 'long o' the rig-out you've got on, ye see, ma'am."

"Uncle Steve!" a little sharply spoke up his nephew.

"'Tis the truth," gently interposed Felipa, almost timidly touching an arm with her little hand. "I am a woman. I put on this garb, the better to work out a sacred duty to the dead, senores."

"Which fetches us up to the pint I wanted to git at, ye see, ma'am. That treasure, or bonanza: you was in plum' earnest when you said—or let him say, ruther—that it was hid out by your father, in war times?"

"On thy guard, nina!" hissed Manuel Diaz, speaking in Spanish the better to shield his meaning from the Americans.

But before he could say more, or Felipa could make reply to either of the speakers, a strange and terrifying event took place.

The earth seemed to quake and shiver, the ground growing unstable beneath their feet, causing them to reel and stagger hither and yon with gasping ejaculations of mingled surprise and terror. The hillside seemed slipping and trembling, starting great rocks from their bed of ages, yet without causing the nausea which marks the coming of an earthquake.

"It's a landslide!" roared Hurst, loudly. "Save yourselves!"

#### CHAPTER XIII.

##### A BLIND FIGHT FOR LIFE.

HIS strong voice was barely audible above the growing din, and not one of his companions could have fully understood his words.

That hollow rumbling sound was growing into an ugly roar as huge rocks crashed against others, as trees began to topple while already in downward motion, their brittle limbs crackling and snapping and adding to the frightful confusion, the increasing tumult.

The entire mountain seemed rocking on its base, as though wrestling for very existence in the grip of a mighty earthquake; or so it would have seemed to the little party so unfortunately

caught on the hillside, just where the disturbance was most violent, had there been time given them for even a passing thought other than to their safety from a hideous death.

Again did Silver-tip Steve roar forth that warning, at the same instant springing into action:

"A landslide! Flee, for your lives!"

"Felipa!"

"My little one!"

All in a breath came those different cries, and at the same moment three pair of strong arms were in motion to save the same being!

They were men—she was a woman; that was enough to give their fight for life an object and a direction.

It all came so swiftly! Barely a score of seconds had elapsed since that first ominous quiver and groaning echo, yet—already the earth seemed slipping away beneath their drunken feet—already the moon was hidden and its light blotted out by the clouds of suffocating dust which rose in clouds from the unstable mass of dirt and trees and mighty rocks!

"All together!" roared Silver-tip Steve, too intensely wrought up to note the fact that even his own ears failed to catch the words his lips shaped. "Shoulder to shoulder! Not down—across!"

The earth seemed to crumble beneath his feet as he caught both Felipa and Nash in his powerful arms, lending them an impulse which helped to gain several yards in the direction he named. Believing himself doomed, yet thinking only of others, the Sky-scraper flung the young couple still further ahead, hoping to keep them from sharing his fate.

His feet struck something solid—another object struck his side as he partly fell over, after that generous push. The blow was severe, and Silver-tip Steve had a mad fancy that it sent him flying, end over end, at least a score of rods!

Yet, an instant later, he found himself on his feet, and could see those phantom-like forms of the struggling three, almost within reach of his extended hands.

"Across, not down!" he roared, plunging forward through the suffocating dust and rejoining his companions. "To the edge, or we're gone!"

It was little less than a miracle that the party remained intact, even though it had been less than a single minute since the alarming disturbance first made itself felt. All about them the rocks and trees and huge masses of earth were rolling, crashing, slipping, full contact with any one of which could hardly be less than death. Still—all were safe, all were doing their level best in that blind fight for dear life—the life of a woman, first of all!

But Silver-tip Steve saw the end coming, even as he gave vent to that guiding shout.

Straight upon them came a huge mass of stone, toppling over as it came plunging down the steep, threatening to bury them all deep in the shifting earth, or to crush them into a hideous pulp!

He flung his enormous power into one mighty effort, pushing and flinging the trio far ahead, risking their limbs on the chance of saving their lives! Then, when the terrible mass was almost upon him, the gallant fellow did all that was left him—flung himself backward in an almost hopeless effort to preserve his own life.

Hardly realizing what caused it, the trio were flung down, as they plunged ahead, becoming separated by a few feet.

It seemed as though that must be the end—that they had been torn apart to give death its bitterest triumph! And possibly it was this very horror of dying alone that lent both Nash Baldwin and Manuel Diaz strength sufficient to conquer, after all.

Just how, they could never have explained, but almost before Felipa could realize that she was alone, the two men were again with her, desperately renewing that blind, aimless fight.

The dust-cloud was cleared away from their front by an eddying whirl of wind, and Nash Baldwin gave a gasping cry of joy as he caught sight of a huge mass of stone only a few feet away; a mass that stood unshaken in the midst of that slowly shifting avalanche!

"To the rock!" he shouted, renewing the fight with what seemed tenfold his normal powers, pushing Felipa ahead, thinking only of saving her life from being blotted out by the plunging rocks and debris, now coming thicker and faster as the mighty landslide found itself fairly under headway. "Save her, man!"

Fortunately Manuel Diaz made the same discovery, and lending his strength to the effort, Felipa was half carried, half pushed across those few feet of space, falling at the base of the immovable mass, with Diaz tripping at her side, yet managing to save her face from injury in that fall, at his own expense.

They were saved, so long as that mass of rock retained its position; but how fared Nash Baldwin?

Even while bending his every energy to preserving the life of the maiden in whom he felt such a strong if sudden interest, the young man knew—by instinct, as it were—that he could not



save both Felipa and himself; that the effort of sending her under the sheltering rock, would check his own rush quite enough to bring at least a portion of that plunging mass upon him, and—

A leaping stone struck his head, knocking him senseless!

"Mother of mercy, Manuel!" gasped Felipa, scrambling to her feet with marvelous activity when all that she had gone through during those few seconds was considered. "Look! the noble señor! Save him! He must not perish, while—"

Even while appealing to her servant, Felipa acted.

She caught sight of the young American, just as he fell stricken senseless by that flying missile. She saw that he was being carried away from the friendly shelter by the landslide, and without pausing to think of her own peril in so doing, the maiden sprung forward and caught Baldwin by an arm, desperately striving to drag him back under that sheltering rock.

Instead, she would surely have been dragged to destruction in his company, only for the assistance so promptly lent by the old Californian. And, even then, it was a hard fight for what seemed no better than a corpse, for the rolling debris began to pile up over that obstruction until its very weight promised to give the roaring monster three victims in place of one.

"Now—he must not die!" fairly shrieked Felipa, her head so close to that of her servant that he caught her meaning even above that deafening roar.

A boulder came whizzing past, in its leap knocking more than half of the weighty mass from the body of the young adventurer, and then, with a united effort, the two saved the one from further harm!

Not until the motionless, senseless youth was placed close up against the base of the standing rock, safe from the still hurrying avalanche, did Felipa cease her desperate fight for the man who had so nearly given up his own life in saving hers.

Together maid and servant crouched, shiveringly waiting the end.

That terrible struggle had exhausted their physical powers, leaving them all the more susceptible to bodily fear. And, truly, that horrible roaring—the knowledge that nothing could save them from instant death should this one rocky barrier go down before that awful pressure—with what they could dimly see of the landslide itself, looking through the clouds of dust like some frightful river, plunging over a mighty precipice—was enough to breed abject terror in even the strongest of brains.

Luckily the end was not long delayed. The little party had been more than half way up the slide, when it broke loose. More than a minute had been consumed in their struggle for dear life; a minute of actual time, though it seemed nearer an hour! And as the avalanche advanced, its progress grew more and more rapid.

The debris piled up against the rocky mass. It shot an ugly flood over its crest, falling with a crashing roar far down the slope. It curled around the sides of the rock, rapidly encroaching on the space granted the refugees, menacing them with suffocation even there.

Then with a gradually expiring roar, the end was reached!

"Praise be unto Mary Mother, and all the saints!" fervently cried Manuel Diaz, on his knees in front of his young mistress, crossing himself with untiring rapidity. "Blessings cover the Holy Virgin, for thou art still alive! thou art saved, my noble lady!"

"Blessed be her name!" echoed back Felipa, rallying from the stupor which had followed the blind fight. "But—Manuel, help! I fear me this gallant señor is—no! he must not die!"

"What is to be, will be, *nina*," said Diaz, using his knuckles to dig the dust out of his eyes. "If he is dead—you are saved!"

"By his noble hands! He gave his life to preserve mine! And I—help me, Manuel! Must I order thee to be just?"

Growling beneath his breath, the old fellow came to her assistance, but with little zeal. Now that death had passed them by, he had time for other thoughts. And, even before this, Felipa had betrayed her deep interest in this stranger. And he one of those heretical Americans!

"'Tis only a trifle—he is not dead!" said Manuel, after a quick examination of the motionless youth; and one would have said the old man was announcing some great misfortune rather than glad tidings, judging from his gloomy tones.

"Thanks be thine, Mary Mother!" softly breathed Felipa, lifting both eyes and hands briefly upward. "And the other señor, Manuel? He is not with us? I do not recall—why is he not here, too?"

"Ask the avalanche, *senorita*!" with an outward fling of his hands.

"And—he fought so nobly for our lives! Go—call him, Diaz! I will tend to this noble señor, and you—find his friend, if you can! Go—he may need thy help, even as we needed his but a little while since!"

Smothering an uneasy oath, the old man obeyed, leaving the rock which had given them such an opportune refuge. He called aloud, but only a few times, for the cries which came floating back to the hill, surely were not from the lips of the man he was forced to seek!

"Listen, *nina*!" he hoarsely muttered, as he came back to the rock where Felipa was doing her best to restore Nash Baldwin to consciousness. "'Tis those accursed *ladrones* at the hacienda! Hear ye not?"

He was right. In some manner the ruffians left bound and gagged at the Haunted Hacienda had slipped their gags, if not their bonds, and were shouting shrilly for help, no doubt greatly alarmed by the roar and crashing shock of the landslide. And—more yet!

Answering shouts came from a still greater distance!

"'Tis from the town, *senorita*," hastily explained Manuel Diaz. "The earthquake has alarmed them, and they are coming—hal! they will set Don Carlos free, and he—we must flee, *nina*! flee while we can!"

"I will help carry him—so!" cried Felipa, bending over the unconscious young man, then looking up at her servant. "Quick, Diaz! We can bear him away before those strangers can get here! Quick!"

"Art thou mad, *nina*? Come! thou must not risk—"

"I must—I will!" passionately cried the maiden, her eyes glowing through the dusk. "He offered his life for mine! Don Carlos would slay him without mercy, and—'tis life for life, Manuel Diaz!"

"'Tis more than your life I am thinking of, *nina*! As for him—a cursed Americano? Let him die, if die he must!"

"Then my life shall go out in company with his!"

#### CHAPTER XIV.

##### OUT OF BONDAGE.

If Silver-tip Steve had been a little more gentle in his manner of drawing the final knots in the rope with which he bound Don Carlos Salcedo before stowing that unworthy worthy away in one of the darker niches among the ruins of the Cagatinta hacienda, the renegade Californian might have found greater difficulty in comprehending the puzzle which confronted him, a few minutes later.

As it was, he was dimly conscious of being carried by the giant a short distance, to be unceremoniously dumped on the broad of his back between two huge stones, where he was wedged in beyond the possibility of turning over without aid.

He feebly resisted the placing of a gag between his jaws, but in such hands, even if unhampered by the bonds and in full possession of his senses, he would have been as a child in the grip of a man.

Still, all this helped him to regain his senses, and the quartet had hardly extinguished the fire and left the ruins, before the Californian fully realized all that had befallen him.

That gag smothered his savage curses, but they rose in his throat, all the same; and as soon as he dared make the effort, Don Carlos gave his bonds a long and thorough test!

He gave over, in the end, but only when convinced that it was impossible to either break or slip his fastenings. Escape unaided was out of the question, and who was there to lend him a friendly hand?

What had become of those two knaves into whose deep pockets his gold had slid? Had they betrayed him? Did he owe all this bitter humiliation to them alone?

True, they had promptly played the part assigned them when he gave the signal. They took Manuel Diaz prisoner, and bore him away when so bidden. But—surely he had caught a glimpse of the withered rascal, on his feet and free from bonds?

A storm of satanic rage swept over the bound man, leaving him weaker in body, perhaps, but with his brain clearer than it had been at any moment since receiving that stunning blow from the fist of—whom?

One taller than Dave Terry, broader across the shoulders than Joe Bisbing, if less at the waist. Not Manuel Diaz, surely! That was like comparing a pig to an elephant! Then—

Who was that fellow his eyes so dimly made out, when he rallied from that terrible stroke? Neither of those his busy brain had passed in review—of so much he was sure. Then—was he a lover? Did he really see his arms about her form? The girl he had sworn should be his, if only to make sure of that glorious bonanza! If so—surely he must have made the discovery before, if Felipa del Cagatinta had a favored lover?

Was he to lose both bride and bonanza?

That maddening thought sent the Californian to fighting his bonds once more, and for a time he had no room for other thoughts. Let him once win free, and he would have a terrible revenge for all he had suffered!

He tried everything that a man so thoroughly hampered could try, pausing to catch breath at intervals, only to begin afresh once more. And

he was still struggling when there came to his ears the first rumbling sounds of that land-slide.

At first it puzzled Don Carlos, but he was a native of a country where earthquakes are only too frequent, and as he felt the ground beneath him tremble, cold sweat-drops started out all over his person, for he expected nothing less than that those heavy rocks on each side of him would be brought together by the commotion, grinding his body to a bloody pulp!

Much the same thoughts were torturing his two rascals, hidden from sight of himself and each other, though only a short distance apart. One and all suffered torments during those few seconds; and when at length the awful roaring subsided, their fears were but slightly relieved.

If this was an earthquake—and that was the most natural supposition—other shocks might follow at any moment, even more severe than the first, any one of which might bring their death!

So, each ignorant of the fact that two others were doing the same thing, the prisoners began fighting their gags.

Don Carlos was the first to succeed in freeing his jaws, though at the cost of his own skin. He fiercely rubbed his face against the rock easiest of access, never giving over until the gag was pushed to one side, permitting him to shout aloud for help.

It was his voice that Manuel Diaz caught first as he moved reluctantly out along the disfigured slope, searching for Silver-tip Steve, in obedience to the commands of his capricious mistress, though so utterly against his own ideas of what was right and wise.

Shortly after came the husky notes of Joe Bisbing, followed almost instantly by the shrill pipe of his gaunt partner in crime.

"Yelp, ye devils!" Don Carlos took time to snarl, for their benefit. "We must make them hear at Hard Cash, or—Hark, curses on ye both!"

The bound trio were silent for a brief space, during which one and all caught the faint cries sent forth by the excited citizens, roused to investigation by that strange roaring and trembling shock.

"They have heard!" Don Carlos fairly screamed, in his intense relief at the prospect of getting out of bondage.

"Whoop 'em up, lively!" shrilled Dave Terry, not a whit less excited than his master. "Ef the yairthquake gits hyar ahead of 'em—Yell, Joe, ye fat devil, ye! Yelp—fer keeps!"

For the next minute those ruins were overflowing with noise, wild and varied enough to put a legion of drunken ghosts to flight!

At first Don Carlos did his level best to equal his frightened henchmen, but then, as those truly diabolical screeches made his ears ache, a fresh fear assailed him.

This ruin was called the Haunted Hacienda! Then, were they acting wisely? If the citizens—many of them full of superstition, and sacredly believing each and every one of the countless tales told of headless spooks and hideous ghosts which nightly haunted those ruins—heard such unmusical screeches, would they not keep a safe distance, instead of rushing to the rescue?

Acting on this thought, now almost a conviction, Don Carlos managed to make both of his frightened rascals hear him call their names, and soon as their yells ceased, he hastily explained his fears.

"Let me do the calling," he added, when the knaves must have taken in his meaning. "I will quickly draw help, unless you are mad enough to scare it away!"

"They kin hear ye ef ye holler, boss!" hoarsely spoke the fat member of the gang. "Sing out, fer love o' life, boss! Ef the yairthquake comes back afore they git hyar—good-by us!"

"I don't believe 'twas an earthquake," said Don Carlos, growing cooler and clearer-witted as the prospect brightened. "If so, the noise and the shock would have come from both hills, instead of yonder alone."

"Durn the odds, boss! Only—holler while ye kin, or I will!"

"Silence, I tell you!" with increased sternness in his tones. "They are coming nearer all the time, and plain words will draw them more surely than meaningless shouts. Then, too, we must look further; we must know what answer to give when questions begin to pour in on us!"

"Ef the axin's did to us, cain't we say you're boss?" growled Dave Terry, with something like a threat underlying the words.

"That's just what I wish you to do," said Don Carlos, quickly, passing the poorly concealed menace over for the present. "Pretend to be too badly shaken up to know just what did happen, and I'll smooth everything over so we'll be looked up to, rather than down upon. You agree?"

"Anythin', just so you git a-yelpin' of 'em up, boss," whined Joe Bisbing, plainly made of less tough metal than his gaunt partner.

"Remember, then!" warned Don Carlos. "Act well your part, and I'll pay you double wages. Fail me, and I'll pay you off in cold steel!"

Rapidly as these sentences had passed back and forth, some little time had been consumed, and when he had delivered that double-edged



warning, and paused for a moment to hearken, Don Carlos could quite plainly distinguish excited voices coming from the valley, between the mountain-side and the ruined hacienda.

Knowing that some of the investigating force must be near enough to distinguish his words, the Californian first sent out a clear, prolonged shout, which instantly checked the sound of voices beyond the ruins. Then, after a brief pause, he called out, in slow, clear tones:

"We beg your assistance, gentlemen! We are three men, whom road-agents, or footpads, have left here, bound and unable to free ourselves."

"Who are ye, anyway?" called out a stern voice, after a brief pause.

"My name is Salcedo. I am known by many citizens of Hard Cash."

"How come ye to be ketched in such a uncanny place?"

"I will explain everything, but—must we lie bound like dogs, the while? Is there none among ye who knows me; Carlos Salcedo?"

"It's the Greaser Sport, pardns!" called out another voice. "Durn the ghosts, I say! Who's backin' of me up while I go cut him loose?"

Even while speaking the fellow advanced, and with him for a leader, there was no lack of volunteers to scale those ruins.

The three men were speedily set at liberty, and as both of the lesser rascals followed the instructions given them by the Californian, on Don Carlos devolved the duty of explaining the situation.

This he did with considerably more adroitness than truth, saying that he had resolved to pass a night within the Haunted Hacienda, just to test the reality of the ghost tales so freely scattered about. And hiring two stout fellows to back him up, he had made the venture.

"We were attacked by footpads, not spirits, gentlemen," he added, with a short, forced laugh.

"We were ready for ghosts, but the others caught us off our guard, knocking us down, robbing us, then leaving us bound like sheep-killing curs!"

This explanation was accepted without as many questions as would probably have come, only for the landslide to divide curiosity. And the interest in that quarter was deepened when Don Carlos declared his positive belief that the road-agents must have been caught by the mighty avalanche!

"I heard them say something about the hill, and I am certain that they left the ruins on that side! If they *did* go there—they were just in time to get caught and overwhelmed!"

"Ef so, they're past savin'," grimly laughed the bold fellow who had led the way into the ruins. "Still, mebber we kin find a piece or two big 'nough fer to sw'ar to. Le's give it a whirl on that basis, anyway, fellers!"

Don Carlos fell back to the side of his two knaves, whispering to each in guarded tones:

"Join in the search, men! Look for the young fellow I pointed out to you, and if you can capture him *alive*, and get away from this crowd with him, unseen and unsuspected, I'll pay you your own price!"

"You don't reckon—thar won't be no more o' them durned airthquakes, reckon, boss?" hesitated Joe Bisbing.

"'Twas no earthquake," frowned Don Carlos. "Look for yourself, man! Nothing worse than a landslide, caused by the recent heavy rains."

Silenced, if not convinced, Bisbing joined Terry in the hunt, while Don Carlos did what lay in his power to urge on the rest of the curious crowd.

He really did believe that those who had so humiliated him that night, had taken to the hills in this quarter, and he half-hoped, half-feared that the party had been caught in that death-trap.

"If only Felipa escaped, the devil might have the others, in welcome!" he viciously snarled, clambering into the thick of the tangled mass of debris, pushed far out into the valley.

The search was pressed vigorously enough, but without success, although fully an hour was thus employed. Then, as Don Carlos caught sight of a tall figure approaching him through the dim light, he heard a voice send in advance the half-sneering words:

"What sort of racket are you setting up on the boys, pardner?"

#### CHAPTER XV.

##### TOM ASHLEY WANTS TO COME IN.

THE voice sounded fairly familiar, and where the dim light had failed his eyes, keen though they were, Don Carlos was better served by his ears.

"'Tis you, then, my very dear friend of the tiger?" he ventured, half assertingly, while peering through the uncertain light at that tall, gracefully athletic shape.

"I believe it's me, though I'd hate to lay evens on anything, now I've heard this racket you're setting up on the boys," nodded Tom Ashley, with a perceptible sneer in his voice as he drew nearer.

"The racket? That is—oh, the thunder of the landslide! Only for that—only for the noble curiosity the racket awakened, senior, what

might not have been the ultimate fate of us all!" ejaculated Don Carlos, flinging up his hands with a dramatic flourish.

The senior partner of the Mint paused close before the Californian, his long legs divided, his hands carelessly thrust into the pockets of his light sack coat, his head turned a bit to one side, a smile in his blue eyes and beneath his blond mustaches.

"Well, pardner, if I haven't got my Sunday school lessons all mixed up by neglecting the cue-card, it's easy enough to predict what would ultimately become of at least *one* of the outfit; don't the book hitch lying and brimstone together?"

"Senior! you mean—what?"

"What I said at the beginning of the deal, Salcedo," with a crisp nod as their faces came closer to each other. "What sort of deal are you giving the sports, anyway?"

"What have you heard, Senior Ashley?"

"That you and a couple of toughs were caught by road-agents while watching for spooks at the ruins, down yonder! That's what the boys gave me, but it came too mighty tough for my swallow."

"Suppose I should say that 'tis all truth, senior?" slowly asked the Californian, trying to read the full meaning lying back of those keen blue eyes.

"Suppose I should say that 'tis all guff, senior?" came the drawling response, with the swift addition: "Don't try that on, Salcedo! I'd be in duty bound to say you lied. You'd feel in duty bound to pull your gun, and—"

"I have no arms—see!" flinging out his hands, at the same time turning slowly around before the skeptical gambler. "Those devils stripped me of all—even of my knife!"

"They left you one thing, though, pardner," laughed Ashley, as he swiftly but gently placed the tip of a slender finger on that lump rising between the eyes of the Californian. "Did you remember to look at your watch, to note the exact time of receiving this pretty token of good-will, Salcedo?"

Don Carlos shrunk back a pace, showing his teeth in a snarl of mingled anger and doubt; but Ashley gave a low laugh of seeming good-fellowship, adding in guarded tones:

"That's all right, pardner! I'd have turned the same trick had I been in your place, with a pack of curious critters pelting me with impudent questions. Still—it's hardly worth while to try bluffing against a fellow who's only too willing to stand in with you."

Still, Don Carlos seemed inclined to fight shy of the gambler, or else he was really as puzzled as he sought to make appear, by the somewhat technical terms used by Tom Ashley.

"Still a little more light, eh?" laughed the sport, casting a quick glance around, as though to make sure no inquisitive ears were within hearing distance. "All right; I'll face my other cards, and let you study them before making your game."

"You were knocked down by one of the two Greasers—you are a native Californian, pardner, so the term needn't make you squirm!" Ashley nodded, half apologetically. "As I said, you got a love-tap at the door of the Mint, that came mighty nigh laying you out for keeps. I ought to know, for I was the man to pick you up, and—"

"My thanks are yours, senior, but what—is it a reward you need?"

"Dip lightly, pardner!" frowned Ashley, stepping back as the Californian slipped a hand into his pocket, as though feeling for money. "I'm no beggar, and, too, don't forget that the 'road-agents' are supposed to have robbed you at the Haunted Hacienda!"

There was a brief silence between them, broken after a bit by Don Carlos, who slowly, almost painfully, enunciated:

"Is it a quarrel you are seeking, senior?"

"Not a bit of it, pardner! Least of all, with you," an empty hand going out as for a friendly grip.

"Then—just what is it I am to understand, senior?"

"That I want to know more about the young fellow who came so nigh giving the Mint a black eye this evening. I know that one of the pair knocked you down, as I said before. Did you follow them to play even? Did they give you still another dose? Or—was it a sure enough case of road-agents?"

Don Carlos did not reply at once. His eyes drooped before that steady gaze, and from the ground between them, the black orbs wandered around and over to the ruins.

Here and there rudely improvised lights were flitting, borne by such of the curious crowd as had grown weary of that fruitless search where the landslide had wrought its work of destruction. And as he gazed, there came a clear shout, followed by a flocking of lights toward a common center.

"Hal! they have made some sort of discovery!" ejaculated Don Carlos, rapidly making his way in that direction, closely followed by the Mint Sport. "What can it be?"

"Maybe another victim of your—road-agents, pardner!" maliciously suggested Ashley, as they gained the level and pressed rapidly on.

Instead, the little excitement was caused by one of the torch-bearers stumbling across the weapons taken from his prisoners by Silver-tip Steve, and at once recognizing his own, Don Carlos was quick to make the claim, proving his property by describing the monogram etched on the blade of the silver-bilted knife.

Terry and Bisbing had recovered sufficiently from their hurts to also put in a claim, and that little episode came to an end.

Through it all, Tom Ashley kept Don Carlos company, like one who is resolved to reach a definite understanding before parting. The Californian recognized as much, and when they left the ruins once more, he only paused to make sure his words would not be caught by other ears, then spoke up:

"Can I trust you, senior?"

"From start to finish, Don Carlos," was the instant response.

"And you are curious to learn more of the young fellow who played such a bold game at your establishment, this evening?"

"Precisely, pardner!"

"May I ask you why?"

"Because I believe there is money in it. Come, let's leave the rest of this wild-goose chase to the boys, and go where we can have a quiet talk of our own, pardner!"

"Wait—not yet!" shaking off the hand that touched his arm. "I must have a little time to think. And then—'twas truth I spoke when I told the crowd I feared the landslide had overwhelmed them all!"

"The young fellow, too?" Oh, come, pardner!"

"I swear to you—see!" and Don Carlos flashed forth his recovered knife, pressing the cross-hilt to his lips.

Tom Ashley was taken aback by this. He knew enough of the race to which Don Carlos belonged, to feel sure he would not of his own accord take an oath like this to a positive lie.

"Then I don't reckon I've got any more time to spare, just now, Salcedo. There's more money for me back at the Mint, dealing for such suckers as have returned to the bait. So-long, pardner!"

He fairly turned away, but before he had taken half a dozen steps in the direction of town, Don Carlos was at his side, a restraining hand on his arm.

His brain had been very busy during the past few minutes, and from the very first he felt that he recognized a kindred spirit in this dashing gambler.

If he had hesitated about trusting him, it was through no fears of meeting with too strict honor. What he wished time for, was to convince himself that he could find a profit in taking Ashley into partnership, whole or limited.

True, he had not quite banished all doubts on the score of wisdom, but he could always substitute a lie for the truth, should he see fit to throw the gambler aside as a too costly or useless tool.

"There is money, you say, Senior Ashley?" he whispered, giving a keen glance around, like one who fears to have a precious secret surprised.

"More than I'm likely to pocket here, at any rate, Salcedo!"

"More than—call it a poor quarter of a million, senior?"

"What do you mean by that? Not—have you posted a reward of a quarter million for the capture of your road-agents, Salcedo?"

His sneer was passed by unnoticed, for Don Carlos saw that he had succeeded in arousing a powerful curiosity.

"I have had no time to post rewards, my friend," the Californian said, his gaze turning wistfully toward the searchers still scattered over the landslide. "But I am convinced yonder mass of rocks and trees and dirt conceal a fortune well worth even your hunting!"

"Put your meaning into plain words, man! What sort of fortune? How am I to get a finger in that pie?"

"Help me go over the mass once more, then, if nothing is found to convince my mind that my game has been ruined by a stroke of blind fortune, I'll talk as plain as even you can wish, partner!"

Tom Ashley said no more, but bore the Californian company in that fruitless quest. He was still far from convinced that Salcedo was giving him "straight goods," as he mentally termed it, but he reckoned the chance was worth an extra hour or so.

"If not, I reckon I'll make it up in the fun of seeing Mister Greaser dance to my music!" was his mental conclusion.

On questioning the searchers, it was learned that no discovery had been made such as Don Carlos both feared and longed for. If the alleged road-agents had been caught by the landslide, their bodies were buried too deep under the debris for recovery, alive or dead.

His own inspection producing naught of value, Don Carlos sought out Dave Terry and Joe Bisbing, bidding them remain on guard at the landslide through the remainder of the night, keeping both eyes and ears open so long as any of the citizens lingered in that neighborhood.

"If you discover anything—if any bodies are found before the sun rises—hasten with the news to the Mint. I will be there, or will have left



word at the bar where you can find me," were his parting instructions.

As he rejoined Ashley, the gambler said:

"Pretty near time to begin that deal, isn't it, pardner?"

"I will tell you everything, my friend, but not here. 'Twould be only too easy for curious ears to steal near enough to catch part of the golden secret."

"And there isn't enough of it to go any further around—just so!" laughed Ashley, slipping a hand through the other's arm, and leading him away in the direction of Hard Cash. "All right! I've got a neat little snugger of my own, over the Mint, where we can talk without fear of eavesdroppers. Will that serve, pardner?"

"Most admirably, my dear friend."

"Good enough! Let's get there, pardner!"

This did not take many minutes, for by this time both men were eager to reach a perfect understanding, and only stopping at the Mint bar long enough to tell Collins that private business would keep him from the gaming-room for a time, Ashley guided Don Carlos to a neatly furnished chamber over the bar.

Turning the dimly burning lamp higher, the gambler set out cigars, liquor and glasses on the little table, then the two men drew up their chairs, facing each other, with the table between them.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### DON CARLOS DEALS HIM A HAND.

"YOUR deal, pardner!" curtly nodded the gambler, helping himself to a cigar and filling a glass for himself, after having served his companion. "Hit my ears with that quarter of a million once more, please!"

"You think it is all moonshine, then?" slowly asked Don Carlos, pausing with the glass almost at his lips.

"I hope not—for *your* sake!" pointing the words with a short, significant bow.

"That means?"

"Well, a joke is all correct in its proper place, Salcedo, but one as big as this, would make a milder man than me gag. So—I'm hoping the deal will run to an end without breaking up in a row. See?"

"I see a threat, Senor Ashley."

"Not if you are dealing straight, pardner. If you're playing crooked, and get caught at turning the trick, you've a right to expect a bit of kicking across the board. You see, pardner, there's nothing like setting out on the dead level, in my opinion."

"Then it is a warning, such as one gentleman has a perfect right to give another, instead of a threat?"

"Now you've called the turn, Salcedo," with a nod of grim approval. "Just a warning, of course."

"That is different, my friend. I might kick, as you term it, at the one, but I can overlook the other. So—you have no objections to taking what you call—is it a whack, eh?"

"A whack is near enough, pardner. Let 'em slide a bit faster, if it isn't asking too much of a gentleman carrying such dead loads of dignity on his two lonesome shoulders!" nodded Ashley, leaning back in his chair and sending out a swift stream of smoke that only partially concealed the frown that darkened his handsome face.

"Will a whack at a bonanza, guaranteed to be not less than a full quarter of a million, suit your hand, my friend?"

"Up to the nines! All that's lacking is the direction that your bonanza hangs out in, pardner!"

"That there is such a bonanza awaiting the claiming, I can take my oath, Senor Ashley," leaning across the little table as he spoke, his long fingers tightly clasped together, his black eyes sparkling brightly. Whether or no you are the man to help claim it, depends on how you receive the story I have to narrate."

"Spin your yarn, and that question will be quickly settled, Salcedo. Of course it has something to do with your road-agents?"

Although so deeply interested in the subject, Ashley could not refrain from giving that little quip; to regret it as he saw the hot blood leap into the face of the Californian.

"Beg your pardon, Salcedo," he swiftly added, with a bow. "The words slipped out before I knew what was coming."

"No great harm, Senor Ashley. I am not so sensitive to silly jokes as some others," a little stiffly said his companion.

"That evens it all up, pardner. Now—go on with your story."

"Very well, senor. You know the ruined *casa*, called here the Haunted Hacienda, of course?"

"Of course I do! What has that got to do with the bonanza?"

"It is the starting point, senor. The bonanza left that *casa* when it was one of the finest mansions in California. Its then owner feared being robbed by the Americans—'twas at the middle of the fight for independence, senor, you comprehend?"

"You say so, pardner! Can't you make a lit-

tle more haste if you oil up once more?" asked Ashley, refilling his glass.

"Thanks! I will condense, since your impatience seems to be overmastering your native politeness, senor."

"Rung the bell again, Salcedo!" laughed the gambler, once more leaning back, convinced that he would reach the kernel of the nut to be cracked between them, all the sooner for keeping silence.

The Californian smiled grimly, at length feeling that he had at least evened up the score between them.

"This person of whom we are talking, Senor Ashley, was not wise enough to recognize the inevitable, and instead of making friends of the conquering race he resolved to flee his native land. He was very rich, in gold and silver and precious plate, as well as in land and in herds, droves and flocks. The latter he could not take with him, the former he dared not risk. So, he did the next best thing; gathered his treasure together and buried it in the earth!"

"And you've found the clew to this treasure?" eagerly interjected Ashley, covetousness causing to forget his recently formed resolution so soon.

"There is a clew—yes, senor," nodded the Californian, evading a more direct answer for the moment. "Wait!" lifting his hand in time to check the ready question. "Let me tell the story after my own fashion, and you will reach the end all the more quickly."

"I am not an Americano, Senor Ashley, and though I can speak your language fairly well, when I am not hurried, 'tis different when my brain is hurried faster than my poor tongue can follow. Comprehend?"

Ashley nodded, with an impatient frown. If interruptions caused delay, he would not furnish another, even when requested!

"Very well, senor. As I said, this foolish countryman of mine put his treasures all under ground, then fled across the border with his family, settling down in Mexico."

"No doubt he intended coming back to claim his own, at the time, but the saints decided differently. My countryman caught the fever, and soon drew his last breath."

Ashley nodded again, as the Californian paused, seemingly to afford his companion an opportunity for asking a question.

"You are content, so far, Senor Ashley? Very good! I will continue my narrative, by stating an important fact. This unfortunate countryman of mine died, as I had the honor to state, but before his death there was a birth. So, you see, senor, *an heir* was born to the bonanza I am giving you the plain history of."

"What?" ejaculated the gambler, his eyes glittering as he straightened up in his seat, one tightly-clinched hand falling upon the table with a force that caused decanter and glasses to dance merrily. "You don't mean to say that the young fellow who came so near turning us out of the Mint, is that heir?"

"You simply anticipate my next sentence, senor," bowed the Californian, with a smile. "That young fellow is the rightful heir to the bonanza—yes."

"You knew this at the time he was here? Knew it, yet let him slip through your fingers?"

"That was my misfortune, not my fault, Senor Ashley. I thought my grip was tight enough to hold him, but—fate willed it should be so, it seems, senor."

"Oh, curse your fatality, man!" snarled the angry gambler. "Any one who would let such a glorious chance slip through his fingers, ought to starve to death with abundance just beyond touch of his lips!"

Don Carlos smiled wickedly as he leaned back in his seat, watching the fuming gambler, plainly pleased with the exhibition.

Whether such was his intention or not, Ashley caught that smile, and instantly recovered his lost composure, his handsome face flushing vividly as he slowly uttered:

"Show good cause for that smile, Don Carlos Salcedo, or I'll hand in a little account for you to settle. Understand?"

"I smiled simply because I had won such an earnest partner, Senor Ashley," was the cool reply.

"Then—you know where to put your fingers on that young whelp?"

"With your efficient aid, senor, I trust to do so, right speedily," was the instant response. "I did fear he had been caught by yonder landslide, but I've reasoned the matter out differently, since."

"Then I was right in thinking he had something to do with your road-agent scrape at the ruins?" bluntly demanded Ashley.

"Only for him, that would not have taken place," bowed Don Carlos. "I can admit as much, now, without a blush. You see why I could not defend myself, by slaying him?"

"You'd be a fool to even risk it, pardner!" with hearty assent.

"Very good. I will resume. I spoke of how the bonanza was buried, but I did not tell you that, of all engaged in that hiding away, the little old man who bore his master company at the Mint this evening, Manuel Diaz by name, is the only one left alive at the present time."

"Then—of course the treasure has been unearthed! Why have you held back so long, man? Why didn't you—"

"The bonanza has not been unearthed, as yet," coldly interposed Don Carlos. "I can make oath to that effect. And now—how far are you willing to go, Senor Ashley, for a share in that bonanza?"

"How big a share?" slowly asked the gambler, keenly watching the swarthy face opposite.

"Well, that mainly depends on how far you are willing to go," was the cautious response.

That duel of eyes lasted for a full minute, at the end of which Tom Ashley gave a short, hard laugh, then said:

"Well, pardner, supposing the share is a liberal one, the question ought to be put a little differently: say, how far I *wouldn't* go?"

"In still plainer words, that means?"

"I don't say that I'd stab my own father, supposing he was still in the land of the living, Don Carlos, but anything short of that would hardly make me gag."

"Would you flinch and turn weak at the cries of a woman, Senor Ashley?" asked the Californian, still feeling his way.

"I'd dance to the music, man!"

Don Carlos reached a hand across the table, and the gambler gripped it firmly. Their eyes met, and in those blue orbs the Californian read enough to convince him that this man could be fully trusted, with such a rich bait as he had to offer.

"I will confess all, my friend, now that I have thoroughly tested your metal! You shall name your own share out of this glorious bonanza. I care nothing for the gold—"

"Steady, pardner!" came the almost harsh warning.

"'Tis truth, all the same, my friend, as you shall quickly be convinced. I am of a hot-blooded race, on both sides. Love to me is ten-thousand fold more precious than yellow dross! And—I am in love, Senor Ashley!"

"So have I been, times without number, pardner," laughed the gambler. "But love never closed my eyes to a tit of gold, thank fortune!"

"There is room in my eyes, as in my heart, for but one thing at a time, my friend," seriously added Don Carlos. "I love, but—alas!—my love is not returned!"

"Why don't you take it, then?"

"I will, if you lend me the aid I am ready to purchase, Senor Ashley," nodded Don Carlos, sharply. "Swear that you will help me carry off this shy bird of my heart, and in return you can name your own price, out of the bonanza!"

"Even if I should cut it in half, pardner?" ventured the gambler, avarice glittering in his keen eyes as they closely watched the swarthy face opposite, ready to retreat a bit should he see signs of setting his figures too high.

"Even if you should hold out for still more, I could not hesitate or try to drive a bargain," cried Don Carlos, with a proud flinging out of a hand, his mustaches curling curiously with the working of his full, sensual lips.

"I'll try not to be too hoggish, pardner, though you're piling up temptation in my path, big as a mountain!" laughed Ashley. "Where do you reckon this bonanza is hidden?"

"Why were they so eager to win the Mint, to-night? Because the bonanza is hidden under, or very near, this very house, Senor Ashley!"

"Are you crazy, man alive?" gasped the gambler, hoarsely. "Then—who is that young sport? What has he to do with the treasure?"

"That young sport was not a man, but a woman, and she is the lady I ask your help in making my wife!" slowly declared the Californian.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### IN A LIVING GRAVE.

ALTHOUGH his mighty arms inclosed all three, in that moment when certain destruction seemed the inevitable fate of all, Silver-tip Steve had thoughts for only one.

These strangers were as nothing to him, now, however deeply interested he might have been in the younger member when the first shiver of that awful change made itself felt.

His only thought was given to Nash Baldwin, the sole relative a remorseless fate had left the war-worn veteran, the one being on earth whom he had to care for and love. If *his* life could be saved, what matter the rest?

It was with this sentiment uppermost in his swiftly-working brain, that Silver-tip Steve flung all his enormous strength into that supreme effort, sending the trio plunging ahead through the cloud of dust and whistling particles flung upon the air by the moving, grinding, groaning mass.

The tremendous effort caused his own person to recoil, and more through instinct than reasoning, the giant flung himself backward, even as that mass of rock seemed falling upon him.

Something struck him—he knew not what. It could hardly have been that toppling mass, from whose path he had so narrowly rescued the blinded trio an instant before. A touch from those jagged corners would almost surely have caused instant death.

And Silver-tip was not dead, although the



blow he received was enough to knock him down, tangling his limbs up with a quantity of rolling *debris*. He was partially stunned by the shock, his great muscular strength was taken from him, and together with it all desire to continue that blind fight for life.

Yet he had consciousness enough left to know that he was being carried along on the landslide. He could feel the sharp blows given his person by flying stones or other light missiles. He could feel the rough bed on which he was lying, helpless as one in a hideous nightmare dream, working, writhing, rising and falling in spots, just as though each fragment was alive and struggling to win its way clear of the general tangle.

Dimly, dully, still like one in a dream, Stephen Hurst wondered how long that hideous ride would last. Already it seemed to have lasted for minutes, and to have covered miles of space. Then—

The bottom seemed falling out of it all—there came a heavy shock, and after it complete insensibility!

How long his senses were blank, Silver-tip Steve could only give a vague guess, when they rallied sufficiently to even shape such a thought.

His first positive sensation was one of difficult breathing, almost of threatened suffocation. And as he forced a mighty gasp to relieve his oppressed lungs, he came very near ending the struggle, almost before the fight had fairly begun.

Fine dust seemed to pour in at his opened mouth, parching his throat and clogging his lungs, causing him to cough violently. His entire frame was racked by that convulsive effort, and more than all else it caused him to realize something of his perilous situation.

Heavy particles fell upon his face, stinging and causing pain. A heavy arm seemed lying across his breast, keeping it from rising as his lungs labored. Dull pain prickled through his legs, held immovable, as he now began to realize.

He opened his eyes, but all was darkness about him. Where had the moon gone to? Surely, it had been shining brightly overhead only a few moments before, while he was walking—

A bit of dirt dropped upon one eyeball, and Silver-tip Steve instinctively tried to lift a hand to relieve the pain. In vain!

And in that helpless moment he knew the whole terrible truth—he had been buried alive by the landslide!

For a brief space that blood-curdling thought held him motionless, paralyzing all save his too busy brain. Better if the benumbing touch had fallen upon that, too, since its workings could bring only torture, not relief!

Although so helpless in body, with each and all of his limbs held as in a stiffening mold of plaster, he felt so strong, so full of life and vitality. To be confined while yet a perfectly healthy man! To feel—almost hear—his strong heart beating so full and regular, yet knowing himself as helpless as one already a corpse!

That was the bitterest part of it all. Death alone was but a comparative trifle, but death in this guise, death that might take hours, even days, to slowly creep upon him there in utter darkness! That was horrible, far worse than death itself!

To a man more wholly in love with life, that bare thought might easily have brought with it the only remedy which seemed possible—a swift and instant death, through fright; but with Stephen Hurst it was different.

He had spoken only the simple truth when telling his nephew, Nash Baldwin, that he had recklessly sought death for years, wherever death flocked thickest. True, a change had come with later years, and in the knowledge that he had at least one true heart to love and care for him, one relative whom he could love and serve, Stephen Hurst had begun to realize that, with all its blemishes, this is a good world to live in, with all its pangs and sorrows, this is a life to cling to.

Yet those harsh lessons of the far-away past had not been forgotten, and no man drew the breath of life who could look death in the face with less personal fear than Silver-tip Steve.

"For myself, it don't matter, but—I'll live for the lad, if it's in the wood!" was the first connected thought that shaped itself in the giant's slowly clearing brain.

After he smothered that first coughing-spell, Silver-tip doggedly resisted the temptation, though his lungs labored with difficulty, and each breath apparently had to fairly drill its way through the dirt that clogged his throat and windpipe.

In that complete darkness, eyesight was of no avail, and Silver-tip Steve kept his lids closed. At least that would protect them from injury if other fragments of that unseen roof should fall.

That there *was* a roof of some sort, Silver-tip knew, blinded though he was. He could feel that an empty space existed above his face, but how high that reached, or how far it extended in other directions, he could only give a vague guess, as yet.

Since this was so, why could he not move with greater freedom? His limbs seemed free

from serious injury, for he could move his muscles without actual pain. Still, only his head and neck seemed free from that strait-jacket, so to speak.

Little by little he sought to draw up his right arm, but the object which pressed so cruelly across his chest, also pinioned his upper-arm; and as he made a more vigorous effort, it brought down a shower of fine dirt upon his person.

Instantly Silver-tip ceased his attempt, knowing that death by suffocation would surely be his fate in case the unseen roof should be shaken free from whatever held it up; but at the same time he felt a warm thrill of hope.

That vigorous effort, by contracting the muscles, had caused his fore-arm to draw upward, despite the numbness which had followed the stoppage of circulation!

He worked his fingers, slowly, stiffly at first, but then life seemed to steal back, creeping from fingers to hand, from hand to wrist, then upward still further, until—had his knife been lost from his belt during that wild fight for life?

If not, all was not yet lost, for those fingers had closed about the seeming arm lying across his chest, and Silver-tip Steve now knew he was held down by the limb of a tree!

He lay motionless for several minutes after making that discovery, working the fingers of both hands to prevent their becoming benumbed again. His brain was even more busy, trying to reckon up the chances for and against him.

Supposing he could make use of his knife—already touched by his fingers—to sever that oppressing limb, what would be the result? Would its giving way precipitate that unseen roof? Would it bring about a collapse that could only end in his death?

If not, could he release his lower limbs? If they could be set free, was there any chance of his digging his way through to the outer world?

"More ifs than enough!" was his grim reflection. "But—it can't be anything more than death, and that's only a question of time if I don't make a fight for it!"

That was enough to decide his course of action, and he delayed it but little longer; only long enough to fill his lungs and shout forth the name of Nash Baldwin.

Some more bits of dirt and gravel fell upon him, at the cry. It was not repeated. The smothered sound told him only too plainly that he was buried too deeply under the landslide for his voice to reach the ears of any person outside, if such person there was.

He hardly dared hope that the others had escaped from that rushing mass of dirt, rocks, trees and *debris*. That he, himself, still lived, was little less than a miracle. And what were his chances of ultimate escape from death?

Almost worse than naught!

"I'll die fighting, anyway!" was his dogged resolution, as that reflection came into his brain, and without losing more time, he drew the faithful knife from its scabbard, and began an attack on the limb.

It was hard work, as well as terribly slow, owing to his cramped position, but the blade was sharp, his muscles strong, and little by little the hard wood was carved away. Only when his cramping muscles actually enforced it, did Silver-tip Steve pause in his work, to renew the struggle with the earliest possible moment.

Little by little he felt the cruel pressure over his chest relax, as the weakened limb began to bend, and as yet no material change came to the unseen roof above him. Some few bits dropped down, but nothing that threatened an actual collapse took place.

At length the trusty steel did its work, and the severed limb lifted at that end, sufficiently for the Sky-scraper to shift his position slightly. In doing this, he brought down a little shower of dirt, and for a moment his heart seemed to come up in his throat.

Once again it proved to be a false alarm, and shaking the dirt from his face, Silver-tip found his body almost entirely at liberty.

"Now, legs, where are you?" he muttered, cautiously trying first one then the other.

To his grim satisfaction he found that one was free enough to be slowly drawn up out of its covering of earth.

The other seemed held fast by a heavy stone, or else a mass of compact dirt. Could he ascertain just which, by—good enough! He could bend the severed limb back far enough to admit of his sitting up. And his head failed to touch that unseen roof!

After this, it was no difficult task to set his remaining limb at liberty, thanks to his good knife, now used to dig away the tightly compressed dirt.

Fumbling in his pockets, Silver-tip Steve found a supply of matches, one of which he struck, eagerly gazing about him by its flickering light, trying to sum up his chances of finally winning his way out of that living tomb.

He saw that he had been preserved from being crushed to death by a many-limbed tree, the trunk of which pointed up hill, resting upon a huge mass of rock. Across the tree was a covering of sticks, stones, masses of dirt, forming a

roof, the thickness of which he had no means of even guessing.

Match after match the imprisoned man struck, pausing only when he had determined on the best point to attack in the seemingly insane hope of digging a passage to liberty with his knife alone. Then, knowing that any moment might precipitate a landslide to crush him into pulp, Silver-tip began his attack on the mass at one end of that rock.

To have his worst fears confirmed in less than five minutes!

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### SILVER-TIP STEVE'S VAIN SEARCH.

CLOSE by the mass of rock had seemed the best point for making an attempt to tunnel a way through the *debris*; for since it had saved him from being smothered or crushed to death before, why might it not be of equal service again, in case his digging should set all or a portion of that pile in motion?

So Silver-tip Steve had reasoned, and hence his choice of a point for beginning his battle for freedom.

True, he had no means of knowing that the huge rock had not formed an important part of the landslide. True, it might be his death instead of his preservation in case of another horrible precipitation.

"Odds is the difference! I've got to get out, or I might as well get my eternal discharge all in a lump!" grimly decided the old soldier, plunging his knife into the damp mass before him.

He was guided by the sense of touch alone, since he had but a limited stock of matches, and could not afford to keep one burning while at work. The sense of feeling would serve, until some serious obstacle should be met with. He must save his matches for some such emergency as that.

Then, just how he had no time to even guess, the Sky-scraper seemed to turn the key that held that mighty mass stationary, and with a bewildering suddenness, it all began to move downward!

He tried to shrink backward under shelter of the rock, but in vain. It seemed as though a thousand evil hands closed upon his person, dragging him into the shifting vortex, tossing, tumbling, thumping, crushing him all at the same time.

It was a hideous ordeal, though it lasted only for a single breath, most fortunately; but brief though it was, at the end of the miniature landslide, Steve was left without breath, and almost without consciousness.

He was dimly conscious that the horrible rush had ceased. Then—what was that? Surely—was not that the echo of a human voice?

The thought caused Silver-tip Steve to strive to gain his feet, mechanically brushing an unsteady hand across his eyes, to clear his sight. Then—thank heaven! He could see! He could see the moon riding the clear sky over his head!

He was—  
"Free! Saved from— Nash, my boy! where are you?"

The bewildered veteran stared around him, repeatedly rubbing his eyes to clear them from dirt and dust. He could see no human forms, though the echoes of their voices surely were ringing in his ears.

He could distinguish naught around him, save one mass of ruin.

"Look out!"

Stephen Hurst caught that warning cry, coming from no great distance across the landslide, and in hoarse, eager accents he cried:

"My lad! Oh!—Nash Baldwin!"

"Hellow, thar!" came a hoarse cry in return, an instant later. "Who's a-yawpin' so mighty airnest?"

It was not the voice Silver-tip Steve so ardently longed to hear, and the disappointment filled his throat so full that he could make no immediate reply.

He strove to stagger forward, but only fell upon his face. And then he for the first time fairly realized his situation.

How far he had been carried by the second horrible movement of the earth, he had no means of knowing. It had left him with his head and body uncovered, and in an erect position. But his legs were buried in a mass of dirt and sticks, almost to the waist.

"I say, you critter!" again called forth the owner of that hoarse voice. "Whar be ye? Was ye ketched in the slide?"

"Here! Yes, I'm fast!" called out Silver-tip in reply. "Help, if you're a man!"

"An' ef I didn't want to keep on bein' of a man, pardner, I'd hev got thar heap sight 'fore this, ye want to know," with a short, hard laugh as a human head appeared above an irregular mass of earth. "Ef thar's gwine fer to be ary more sech cussed tumblefactions, *my gittin'* ketched in the squeeze wouldn't do *you* a red cent's wu'th o' good!"

"Have you seen him? Is he safe?" eagerly asked Hurst.

"Meanin' jest *who*, pardner?"

There was but one person in existence for



Silver-tip, just then, and being asked such a question served to confuse rather than clear his unsettled brain.

"Find him! Bring him to me, and I'll break your hand with gold!"

"Say ye will? Then—hitch a name or 'scription onto the critter, pardner, an' I'll fetch him hyar ef he's top o' this wide airth!"

Either because of the prospect seemingly offered for "making wages," or because he had satisfied himself that there was no danger of causing another movement of the slide by so doing, the stranger quickly crossed the intervening space, falling to work at setting the old soldier at liberty.

"Who be ye, anyway, stranger?" he asked, peering curiously into that dirt-masked visage as he labored. "Reckoned I knowed 'most everybody hangin' out in these parts, but you ketch me off my base—yes ye do, now!"

"What's the racket, pardner?" just then called out another of the few citizens who had lingered in that vicinity.

"Found a man, tuck root in the dirt, Jimmy," answered the other, as a glance over his shoulder enabled him to recognize a friend; then hurriedly muttering for the ears of Silver-tip Steve alone: "Don't make him that offer, stranger, fer Jimmy's sech a dug-gun hog he'd not only freeze to yer last dollar, but 'd take yer clothes as well! An' ef he didn't beg ye to throw in yer nat'ral hide, fer make-weight, then I bain't knowed the critter from time he quit suckin' fer chawin'!"

"Jimmy" said nothing more, but he came forward just as Steve was set at liberty, and there was an air of suspicion in his manner of scanning the giant, while keeping well out of reach of those long and strong arms.

Despite his intense anxiety on account of Nash Baldwin, the Sky-scraper could not help noticing this fact, and without exactly comprehending its full meaning, it led him to show greater caution than might otherwise have been the case.

His rescuer was curious to learn just how he had chanced to get into such an awkward box, and bluntly put the question.

"I can hardly tell," slowly answered Silver-tip, brushing a hand across his brows, gazing half-stupidly around them in nearly hopeless quest of his beloved nephew. "I was caught—I reckoned I was gone!"

"Reckon ye would 'a' bin, ef thet ketchin' hed bin done by the fu'st slide! Glory! what a 'tarnal combustion ther must 'a' bin!"

"Wasn't it the fu'st slide that nipped ye, stranger?" asked Jimmy, his suspicions apparently taking point.

"No—the last one caught me," answered Hurst, without knowing just why he did so, turning from that keen gaze with a little shiver. "There was another—a boy—I'm afraid he was caught even worse than I was. Help me hunt for him, and I'll pay you any wages you ask! I must find him—I will find him!" breaking out fiercely, lifting his tightly clinched fist and shaking it as if in defiance against—let us hope against the death he feared for another.

Stephen Hurst staggered and almost fell, as he moved forward, and the first man to his rescue, Minter by name, produced a quart bottle of whisky, urging it upon the nearly exhausted giant.

"Take a ball, pardner, fer ef ever a human critter needed the like, I do reckon that's your awful condish, jest now. Hit 'er hearty, pard! I know whar the bung-hole is left."

Almost unconsciously Hurst obeyed, drinking heavily, and almost immediately feeling the powerful stimulant. It was just what he needed most, after all he had passed through, and when he resigned the flask to its owner, he felt almost as though he had made a new friend.

"I'll not forget it soon, pardner," he said, huskily, falling into his habit of using the vernacular. "Now do still better; help me find my boy! Fer, sence I was left livin', thar hain't no Almighty ef the pore lad's been tuck!"

By this time the news that a man had been found, caught by the last landslide, yet rescued alive, was pretty generally known to all yet lingering near the scene of interest; and it was not long before quite a little company was gathered about the searchers, all eager to gain a fair view of the man who had been plucked out of the jaws of death.

For the most part, these curious ones never thought of connecting Silver-tip Steve with the "gang of road-agents" denounced by Don Carlos Salcedo, the general belief being that he had formed one of the search-party, drawn from Hard Cash by that strange roaring.

There were at least two men who knew different, however, and after gaining a fair sight of that gigantic figure, with its wild-looking beard and shaggy mane of tangled locks, they slunk away, only too willing for the big fellow to pass them by without recognition on his part.

Then, after a hasty consultation under shade of a huge boulder, Joe Bisbing puffed his way toward Hard Cash, leaving his gaunt mate to keep a wary eye on the further movements of the giant.

Silver-tip Steve pressed the search for his nephew with dogged energy, even after it was

painfully certain that Nash Baldwin could not be above ground, at least in that vicinity.

"Mebbe he's given it up fer a bad job, or reckoned you've got back to town," suggested Minter, again urging the flask upon the giant.

The Sky-scraper accepted the whisky, but shook his head to the accompaniment.

If living and above ground, he knew that Nash would be searching for him, somewhere about the landslide; and though it wrung his heart as it had not suffered since the letter containing word of his idolized young wife's flight with another man, he felt convinced that the young man had been caught and buried beneath that cruel mass.

He resolved to know the very worst, even if he had to remove that huge pile of mingled materials with his own hands; but remembering his own marvelous escape from death, though buried so deeply, he kept on searching, stopping at every few paces to shout aloud the name of the missing man.

It was a hope that would have been ridiculous under less pathetic circumstances, but none of those who watched or accompanied the giant, felt anything like scorn or mirth. It was a strong man wrestling in agony such as few natures are capable of feeling.

While Silver-tip Steve was thus engaged, pausing at brief intervals to shout aloud the name of his nephew, then bending his head in dim hopes of catching a response from the earth itself, Minter was drawn apart by his mate, Jimmy Malone, whose first suspicions had grown still stronger with watching and reasoning.

"I tell ye, pard!" he said, with guarded earnestness. "He's one o' the gang the Greaser Sport told us of, fu'st off! Ef he was ketchin' by that weenty slide, would he be rakin' the bull hill over fer the boy he says was 'long of him, at the time? Wouldn't he stick to huntin' right whar that weenty slide tuck place? Don't ye see, dug-gun ye, man?"

Jack Minter scratched his head dubiously. This did seem reasonable, put in that light. Yet—he couldn't believe this grief-maddened giant was a road-agent, Salcedo or no Salcedo.

"Mebbe you're right, pardner, though I don't really think it," he said, at length, moving toward the being under discussion. "Thar's jest the one way fer gittin' at the plum' truth, an' that's mire!"

Before Malone could fairly comprehend his intention, Minter had intercepted Hurst, and was bluntly asking him the question: was he one of the party with whom Salcedo had a racket at the ruins?

"Not that I kin jest swaller all the Greaser Sport said, mind ye, now I've hed a look at an' a drink with you, pardner," was his blunt apology. "Still, some o' the boys is sorter oneasy, like, an'—"

"Tell me just what that devil said, my friend," Silver-tip Steve uttered, his voice low and even, but his huge frame seeming to dilate.

Jack Minter complied, concealed nothing, and when he ceased his account, the giant burst forth in hot hanger:

"Whar is the devil? Only fer him the lad wouldn't—whar is he?"

#### CHAPTER XIX.

##### A DISREGARDED WARNING.

MEANWHILE, where was Nash Baldwin?

That was almost the precise question Nash Baldwin was trying to ask himself, as he opened his eyes on an altogether different scene from that wild turmoil by which he had been surrounded, of which he himself had formed an almost helpless item when last conscious.

All about him was silence. That frightful roaring, crashing, thundering flood of death had subsided, leaving him—surely this was not death?

His heavy lids lifted, to catch a dull glow making the surrounding darkness visible. It seemed to come from one side, and hardly conscious of the effort, Nash Baldwin turned his head slightly to—

"Mary Mother, praise!" came a low, but fervent ejaculation from the lips of the one watching over him, and into whose dimly visible face his vacant gaze had been turned.

Then it all came back to him; he remembered having been struck down by the flying missiles, just as he saw a chance for life before him, just as that blind fight seemed about to end in a victory!

"You—alive?" he managed to utter, though his tongue seemed strangely clumsy, so much too large for his mouth.

"Thanks to you, brave senor!" in still more musical tones, as that more than fair face—no longer disfigured by the assumed mustaches—drew nearer to his, seeming to light up by the glow of her own eyes. "And now I can ask for no more! Now I am ready to praise the saints whose sheltering arms held death at bay! Before—with you, brave senor, lying so deathlike,—I could not give full thanks for—"

The sweet voice grew lower, first faltering, then ceasing in a murmur too indistinct to be called speech.

Partly through emotion as her words recalled what they had been forced to endure, both during that struggle for life, and after, when this

young man had lain so terribly like a corpse. But it was partly due to the fact that Nash, still like one in a hardly waking dream, reached one hand unsteadily toward that phantom-like face, seeking further evidence that this was truth.

He gave a start as his fingers touched that warm face, and with that brief contact his half-stupor faded away.

"You are—thank Heaven, lady, you were saved!" he ejaculated, partly lifting his body, only to let it fall back with an involuntary groan of pain.

Ten thousand red-hot needles seemed pricking him from crown to sole, and he could only gasp and shiver for the next few minutes, though dimly aware that Felipa del Cataginta was speaking to him, her warm hands passing over his brow and gently touching his breast.

"You must not attempt to rise, Senor Nash," were the words that he first understood, after that exquisite spasm of torture passed away, as swiftly as it had come. "You are still very weak. Your poor head is still very—what you call bad."

"It's feeling better—much better, Felipa," the young fellow muttered, drawing a slow, full breath, his lids closing with a languor born of that freedom from torture. "I think—your hand feels so—don't take it away, my—Felipa!"

"If it—if I am doing you good, senor," murmured the maiden, her long lashes still more completely shading her lustrous eyes.

"It feels like a breath of heaven, after a touch from—I mean, it drives away that burning pain, and—"

The little hand dropped from forehead to lips, gently compressing them, and its owner bravely striving to remain in ignorance of the fact that those same lips were shaping a kiss upon her palm.

"You must not try to talk, Senor Nash. You are still too ill. You have so narrowly escaped death!"

"Then—tell me how—" Baldwin contrived to utter, before his lips were closed more securely.

"Will you promise to be guarded, senor? Will you not attempt to talk, until your head is—until the shock passes more—more off?" earnestly demanded the maiden, finding more than the usual difficulty in her handling of the English language.

Baldwin nodded assent, though now that his senses were fairly rallying, he began to feel that there could be nothing radically wrong with his head or his limbs.

Still, his physical powers had been overtaken in that fight for life, and with such a charming face to gaze into, through half-closed lids; with such a low, melodious voice to listen to; with a soft, caressing touch like that upon his brow—who couldn't afford to play invalid, even if so playing carried with it a touch of hypocrisy?

So he lay on his fairly comfortable pallet formed of doubled blankets, looking, listening, feeling. And in low, unsteady tones Felipa del Cataginta sung his praises, while honestly believing she was giving a plain, unbiased account of their escape from the landslide.

"I know—I remember reaching the standing rock," Baldwin said, forgetful of his pledge. "Then I was knocked back into—who pulled me out of that crush, Felipa?"

"We did—Manuel Diaz and I, senor," her voice growing less intense, more steady now that it came to describing her own doings. "It was only a little risk—the worst was over, when you enabled us to gain shelter of the rock. The worst of the fight, I mean, but—the worst of all came when I—when you lay so deathlike, senor!"

Her voice choked, at that, her hands went up to cover her face. The young man could note how her lithe figure trembled at the memory, and he felt a foolish desire to ask her if she would have grieved deeply had he never come out of that stupor.

Fortunately he was able to choke the words back, feeling his own cheeks flush as he did so. He felt ashamed of having played the helpless invalid so long after knowing that no serious injury had been the result of that ugly adventure. At least, he would make it no worse.

He started to a sitting posture, feeling only a fleeting touch of that stinging pain, quickly saying as Felipa gave a start and little cry of reproachful dismay:

"I am better—much better, dear friend. See!" moving his arms with ease, barring a little stiffness. "I am well again!"

"And your head, senor? 'Twas a terrible blow, and—it hurts you no longer, then?"

"Nothing to speak of, my— May I call you Felipa?"

"'Tis my name, senor," her lustrous eyes sinking, almost timidly.

"And my name is plain Nash, yet you tack a formal senor to it."

"'Tis different, senor. I am but a poor girl, and—"

"Maybe it's just because you are—not a poor girl, but a most adorable young lady—that I feel such a strong desire to call you Felipa,"



ventured Baldwin, covering his rashness by a soft laugh. "But I shall not dare, unless you prove that you regard me as a friend, not a suspicious stranger, by calling me Nash. Can you, Felipa?"

"It may be, after a time—Nash!" came the barely audible reply.

Baldwin felt a strange yet very pleasant thrill going all over him just then, but he had sense enough left to see that he might easily lose all by striving for too much, so early.

"I thank you, Felipa. I will try to deserve your trust. And now, please tell me where I am, and how I came here."

He had already made out that they were in a cavern of some description, and was not so wholly lost in new-born love that curiosity was extinct.

In low, almost timid tones, Felipa did as requested, her face flushing under his steady gaze as his eyes kindled with stronger admiration when he came to learn the truth.

Felipa shielded Diaz as much as possible without telling an actual untruth, explaining his hostility as due to the many wrongs he had suffered from the hands of Americans; but Nash Baldwin knew that he owed his life mainly to her efforts.

"I know that you saved my life, Felipa. I know that, only for you, I must have gone down to death in that avalanche; but how came I here? I surely did not walk, else I could remember something of it."

"You were too badly hurt, señor. You were senseless, so—we carried you here."

"You carried me?"

"I am very strong, señor—I *had* to be strong, to fight the evil ones who have wrought my family such bitter harm. So—it was not such difficult work, señor. Manuel, also, is very strong. And—we brought you here, as you see, señor."

"And my uncle: what of him?" slowly asked Baldwin, nerving himself to put the question which had been in his troubled brain so long, the answer to which he so dreaded.

Before Felipa could answer, Manuel Diaz came forward, giving them both a start by his sudden appearance. And in cold, dry tones he said:

"The big señor is in the town, waiting for your coming, señor. May I have the honor of guiding you to your friend?"

Felipa sprung to her feet, catching the old man by an arm, almost forcing him away from the pallet on which the injured youth had been placed when carried unconscious into the cave.

"For shame, Tio Manuel!" the maiden spoke, in tones too low to be caught by their guest, but full of indignant reproof before which her faithful servant meekly cowered. "Have you forgotten how nobly he fought for our lives? Only for his arm, his courage, his strength, what would you and I be now? Where would our oath be? And, after all this, you try to drive him out into the night! Wounded in saving our lives, worn with fatigue, weak from hunger! For shame, Manuel Diaz!"

"I will give him food. I will lead him to his friends who can give him shelter. He must not stop here, for—*nina*, forgive me, but I must say it! You are learning to love this accursed Americano!"

Felipa shrunk back a pace, covering her face with both hands. The truth flashed upon her in that instant. She was—no! And her head rose proudly, her dark eyes flashing vividly, her voice low but stern:

"You forget yourself, Manuel Diaz!"

"I have not forgotten the sacred oath I gave your honored mother, *nina*. I swore to guard and protect you from all harm, while life was granted me. Have I ever before failed in my duty, señorita?"

"Never—never until now, Tio Manuel!"

"Not even now, señorita," with increased gravity. "You are in greater danger this hour, than when down yonder in the ruins of your father's hacienda. Why? Because your heart is arguing in favor of the enemy!"

"Why do you call him an enemy?" with a frown.

"Is he not an Americano?"

"Did he not save our lives, almost at the cost of his own?"

"He was fighting for his own life. We were all wild, all blind, then. What we did, no one knew, at the time. If so—was he not fighting for the great bonanza your life represents, *nina*?"

"I cannot believe that, Manuel Diaz!" with a touch of passionate anger in her voice. "Yet—even so! Even if as evil as you seem to think, would it be the part of wisdom to turn him away? If an enemy, would not such a course only hasten the end? Would he not betray our secrets all the sooner?"

"A knife can chain his tongue, and sooner than that—"

"No more, Manuel Diaz!" sternly interposed his young mistress, a touch of her fingers locking his lips. "You do not mean *that*! If I thought you *did*, I could almost use steel upon your life, myself!"

"My hand would never guard against your blow, señorita. But—at least say you will hold him prisoner until we have recovered the treasure, *nina*?"

Without making any answer, Felipa turned

from the old man, hastening to where Nash Baldwin was waiting the outcome with what patience he could muster. Facing him, her features visible by the ruddy glow of the adjacent fire, the maiden said:

"Manuel Diaz warns me that you are an enemy, Señor Nash. I do not believe it, but—will you pledge yourself to sacredly keep secret all you may learn while our guest?"

"If you say I ought—yes!" was the instant response.

## CHAPTER XX.

### A PLEDGE AND A VOW.

"I do say so, Señor Nash!"

"That's sufficient, Señorita Felipa," bowed Baldwin. "I am ready to take any oath you see fit to prescribe."

"I only ask your word of honor, señor, to hold secret all you may learn while in our company," quickly said the young woman in masculine garb, holding out her right hand, which Baldwin at once covered with both of his.

"It is given, most heartily, señorita. I do not ask your reasons for requiring such a pledge, for I know that you can't be engaged in doing aught that is unlawful, even tinged with wrong."

Manuel Diaz stepped forward, holding out the haft of his knife. He said nothing, but the young man readily understood his meaning, and touched his lips to the cross-hilt without hesitation.

"That is little, since he is a heretic," muttered the old fellow, with a deprecatory look into the face of his young mistress, "but 'tis better than nothing!"

Baldwin could not refrain from laughing, and after a brief struggle Felipa joined him. Even grim old Diaz forced a smile for the occasion.

"Wait," said Baldwin, as the old fellow was falling back. "You said that my uncle—the big man who saved us all from being crushed to death by that rock, you remember?"

"I remember, señor," bowed Diaz.

"You said that he was safe?"

"I said that he was safe, awaiting your coming in town, señor."

"Then you have seen him to-night?"

"It is night no longer, señor," with a faint smile wrinkling his visage still more emphatically.

"Night has long passed away. Though it is so dark in here, outside, the sun is high up—so!" at the same time indicating the meridian.

Baldwin gave a little start at this, for he could hardly believe as much. Had he remained so long unconscious, yet have suffered no more serious injury?

At the same time, a gnawing sensation at the pit of his stomach offered significant proof that a goodly number of hours had passed by since his last meal.

Banishing that sensation for the moment, Baldwin questioned the old man still further, learning that, while he had not himself been in town, Manuel Diaz had seen Silver-tip Steve going in that direction, together with a small party of other Americans.

That was rather disappointing to the young man, for he knew something how his relative would be worrying over his absence, since it was hardly possible that he could even suspect the truth. Still Steve was a tough nut, and an hour or two could not make much difference, so long as he finally learned of the safety of his nephew.

As Baldwin remained silent while arguing this out, Diaz quietly withdrew, leaving the young couple together. And then, casting aside all thought of his uncle for the time being, Baldwin tried his best to bring back the delightful understanding which had before existed between Felipa and himself.

Hardly with as much success as he expected, however. The maiden seemed ill at ease, for the first time betraying a consciousness of her unseemly garb, by drawing a *serape* closely around her person.

"Can I do nothing more than merely give you this pledge of secrecy, Felipa?" Nash asked, resuming his former seat on the pallet, in obedience to the signal given him by that little hand. "I know that you are in trouble. I heard and saw enough down—or over—at the ruins, to know that you have bitter and unscrupulous enemies. May I not help you get the better of them?"

"Wait, señor, until you have heard the story I have to tell," said the girl, her face half-averted, her voice showing embarrassment.

"Will it give you pain, Felipa? If so—if you would rather not say more—remember my pledge. I have given you my trust, and it is perfect. I know you are all that is good, and pure, and lovely! I know that your cause is right, and I'd be only too happy if you would permit me to serve on your side against that black-a-vised rascal, Salcedo!"

But Felipa had resolved to tell her story, though there were portions of it which she felt would be difficult to touch upon while those earnest eyes were watching her face so closely. And she began, briefly describing how and why her father had hidden his wealth in gold and silver and precious plate before fleeing from his native land.

Up to a certain point, her account was pretty much the same as the story told the Mint Sport by Don Carlos Salcedo, so there is no need of repeating it in this place.

The most difficult portion, to Felipa, came after telling of her mother's death, which drew her from the convent where her education was being completed.

Manuel Diaz told her about the buried treasure before showing her the message Donna Cagatinta had left, when aware that death must claim her before Felipa could reach home.

That message bade her use all efforts to secure the lost bonanza, and by the advice of Diaz, she disguised herself as a young man, in false mustaches and masculine garments.

All this was passed over briefly, and as he noted the flush that tinged her lovely face, Baldwin readily comprehended her emotions, and asked no questions which would have protracted that maidenly shame.

After passing that point in safety, Felipa spoke more at length, telling of their amazement at finding a flourishing town where they naturally expected naught but ruins and desolation.

She said that, after the most careful calculations, rendered necessary by the obliteration of nearly all landmarks, Diaz located the spot where the treasure had been hidden, as under or very close to one corner of the Mint!

Their first thought was to buy the establishment, but guarded inquiry showed that it was held at a figure beyond their means, and so other means of getting at the hidden treasure had to be studied up. For, of course, it would be worse than folly to think of digging openly for the treasure, or of trying to unearth it under cover of any one night; and a second night would never be granted them, once their object was betrayed by the coming of daylight.

At this point, Felipa hesitated perceptibly, then went on to tell of her bold attack on the faro-bank the night before, in hopes of winning the establishment. That failed, and afterward followed the affair with Don Carlos Salcedo.

At this point something in the haggard looks of her guest opened the maiden's eyes, and with a half-angry ejaculation at her forgetfulness, she hastened to prepare something to eat.

As a mere matter of politeness, Baldwin attempted to spare her so much unnecessary trouble, but, for all that, he was glad to fail for once.

He was turning over in his mind the story just related, trying to fill out the one or two blanks which he felt certain Felipa had purposely left in her narrative, when Manuel Diaz came up, silently as a ghost, and not much more cheerful looking.

"I request the honor of a few words with you, señor," he said, in cold, measured tones, hand over heart as he bent almost double in a profound bow. "I am at liberty to speak, señor?"

"With all the pleasure in life, my hearty!" nodded Baldwin, one hand going up to hide a yawn. "Beg pardon, sir! My sleep didn't seem to do me much good, long as it must have lasted! But you wish to say—just what, Diaz?"

"That Señorita Felipa del Cagatinta is my mistress, just as I, Manuel Diaz, am her most humble and unworthy servant, señor," bowed the stiff-necked American-hater.

"Me too, pardner!" with a low laugh that only partially concealed his hearty sincerity. "A prouder position than any man ever attained before, let me tell you, my worthy Diaz!"

"It is truth that passes your lips, señor, though it may be meant for a jest. Nay," as Baldwin opened his lips to speak: "I have your permission to say what is bearing very heavily on my heart and mind, Señor Americano. I beg most humbly that you will hear me out."

"Say on, my friend. I'll listen to all you feel like saying."

"The *nina* is my mistress, as I said, señor. She is young and innocent, I am old and used to evil things. She takes it for granted that all things, all men, are just what they appear on the outside, but I long since learned to look below the surface to find the real truth."

"The *nina* believes whatever a smooth tongue may whisper, and to her guileless heart a fair face is a sure passport to her favor, but I am used to looking deeper, señor—much deeper than that!"

"All of which is a prelude to—just what, Manuel Diaz?"

"To this, señor," his voice growing harder, fiercer as he added: "You have taken a sacred oath, señor. Be true to that oath, *be true to her*, or—" swiftly placing the point of a knife at Baldwin's throat, "I will kill you as I would a mad wolf that tried to flesh its poisonous fangs in the heart of my idolized young mistress!"

## CHAPTER XXI.

### TWO KNAVES CROSS PALMS.

DON CARLOS SALCEDO, having made his declaration, leaned back in his chair and gazed across the table at the face of his companion, plainly ready to enjoy to the utmost the surprise his disclosure must have administered.

This was genuine, and though it had been somewhat anticipated by the words gone before,



was quite sufficient to please the dramatically inclined Californian.

Tom Ashley gave a long, low whistle, gazing keenly into the dark face of his opposite, plainly striving to sift the truth out of what he more than half believed a mass of lies.

"This isn't another pack of—well, road-agent flim-flam, is it, pardner?" he at length ventured. "Because, don't you know, a very little of that goes a mighty long ways with a gentleman of my peculiar constitution!"

"I am placing the plain truth before you, my very dear friend," quickly declared Don Carlos, one hand clasped above his heart as he bowed repeatedly. "It is true. Senorita Felipa del Cagatinta was the gay young blade who came so near to pulling the teeth of the tiger, this evening last past, Senor Ashley!"

"You look as though you meant it, too!" muttered the gambler.

"Was the disguise so perfect, then?" laughed the Californian, selecting a fresh cigar and cutting its tip with the knife recovered from the ruins a few hours earlier.

"If it was a disguise—yes! But, look here a minute, pardner!"

"At your service, Senor Ashley."

Their eyes met, and the Mint Sport was keen enough judge to know that, right or wrong, Salcedo intended to stick to the story he had just told. If he was lying, for a purpose, another snare than blunt accusation must be used for tripping him up.

"It's a pretty rocky old deal you're giving me, pardner, but I'll try to stand the racket if you'll clear up a few minor details before going any further," he spoke, deliberately playing for time in which to arrange such a trap.

"To me 'tis perfectly clear, my good friend," nodded the Californian, seeming to enjoy his smoke, despite the frown that wrinkled his brow. "The bonanza ground could not be bought. It could not be taken by force, nor by stealth. So—what else? To one of our race, the answer comes as by inspiration: Fate robbed me, Fate shall make restoration! So—there you have it, Senor Ashley!"

A plausible explanation, as the Mint Sport was obliged to inwardly admit. What would have been impossible to a girl of another race, was simple enough to one of Spanish descent.

Then, too, as he cast his memory backward, he could recall more than one particular which, passed over without notice at the time, went far toward confirming the statement made by Don Carlos.

He remembered that he had not once caught a square view of that *serape*-shrouded figure. It was thought nothing of at the time, for *serape*, face, voice and all went admirably together, and a true "Greaser" is as difficult to divorce from *manga* or *serape* as a "wild Indian" is from his blanket.

Then, too, the silent but complete devotion of the wrinkled old servant was fully explained by this view of the case.

"It does begin to have that sort of complexion, pardner," nodded Ashley, almost convinced by his own swift reflections. "But, if this young sport was really your lady love, how comes it you were so late in showing up?"

"I was detained. I had other labors, senor, which—"

"Which concern yourself more than they can me, eh?" with a short, dry laugh, as he noticed that hesitation. "All right. Let it go at that. We'll play my young sport was your dainty darling, and that she favored the Mint from some such purpose as you have stated. Then—of course you had your own reasons for permitting her to run at loose so long. If not, you could have put the matrimonial padlock about her on the further side of the Grande, with greater ease and a heap more safety to your own noble self. So—I'm waiting for your next card, pardner."

Don Carlos apparently found it no easy task to keep his mind fully abreast of that rapid tongue. He frowned, tugged at his jetty mustaches, and wrinkled his brow; then took his own course without attempting to answer according to note.

"I have told you nothing but the plain truth, Senor Ashley, though there may be a few minor points which it may be as well to clear up before going further."

"Such as why you didn't make sure of your bride first, then have a double claim on this wonderful bonanza," nodded Ashley.

"That is easy, my dear friend," with a significant shrug of his shapely shoulders. "Tis one thing here, another thing across the line, in Mexico. The war is over—yes! But the sting remains behind. And while curses are showered upon even the memory of the accursed Gringos by both high-bred and low-born, both classes have plenty left for all of their race who gave aid and comfort to the Americanos instead of fighting them."

"The Del Cagatintas were on one side, the Salcedos on the other. You comprehend, senor? While on Mexican soil, a Cagatinta needs but lift a finger for help, and an army comes flocking! So—like a wise man, I waited until the odds were reversed, or at least even. Here, who would take the trouble to side with one against

the other, since both were—what you call Greasers!"

"And the hidden bonanza had naught to do with it, then, pardner?"

"That would be a very good thing, yes, my friend," frankly admitted the Californian. "A man is never too rich, and thinks none the less of his bride because she brings him a heavy dowry. But, look in my eyes, Senor Ashley, and see if you can detect even a ghost of a lie!"

"I love this Felipa del Cagatinta, senor! You, of icy northern temperature, know little of the fire that is kindled in our veins by the torch of love; 'tis a fire that must be gratified, else it burns all to ashes. And so, senor, if I can not win both maid and treasure, I am more than willing to resign all claims on the bonanza!"

"You'd give up the whole sum?"

"Rather than risk the loss of my love—yes!"

"And I only asked for a poor little half!"

sighed Ashley, with an exaggerated despair.

"You're sure it will count up a slick quarter of a million, pardner?"

"More, rather than less, my good friend."

"Well, I'll try and be content—when I once get my ten hooks on it! Now—what comes next on the list, Salcedo?"

"Have I made you fully comprehend the relations which exist between Senorita Felipa del Cagatinta and myself? Did I tell you that our families have been at feud for many generations?"

"I'm not so sure, but what has that got to do with it?"

"It needs that knowledge to make perfectly clear why I have to act as I am, and have been acting, my friend. 'Tis because of this old feud that my wooing is out of the ordinary rut. You follow me, senor?"

"Far enough to bump up against another bit of a snag, pardner," nodded Ashley, something of his former suspicions returning as he drove his avarice to the rear, temporarily. "What about that road-agent racket, at the Haunted Hacienda?"

Don Carlos scowled, but quickly cleared his rather marred visage the next instant, and his reply came promptly enough:

"That is mainly why I am making you such a magnificent offer for your aid, Senor Ashley. With only a lady and an old man to manage, I would be an idiot to pay such a price for help, of course."

"That is just the very flea that began to bite me, pardner!" nodded the gambler. "Show cause, and oblige me, please!"

"I was late in coming here, as you stated, Senor Ashley, and before I had time to say more than one little word to the lady of my heart, that cursed Diaz gave me the hilt of his knife—you see?" gently touching the lump between his eyes.

"I've seen it before, thanks. And I know that, with a couple of toughs, you followed the party to the Haunted Hacienda. You got the worst of that deal, as well, but I haven't heard you explain just how it came to pass, Don Carlos. So—promulgate!"

"I had grown tired of simply following my star, senor. I resolved to pluck it and fasten it in my bosom. So—I caused my toughs, as you say, to capture Manuel Diaz, and with my own arms I took possession of his young mistress."

"Who broke your grip? Surely those two weren't your gang of road-agents, pardner?" asked Ashley, with a half-sneer on his handsome face.

"No. There were others. How many, I cannot say. I know that my two knaves were captured, and Manuel Diaz set free. I know that one devil—he looked big as a mountain—came leaping out of the darkness, and in some strange manner knocked me senseless!"

"More—I saw another, smaller, younger, when my senses began to return. His arms were about the senorita, and I tried to shoot him for the dog he was! Tried, and missed! Then—I can recall little more, until the shock of the landslide came, senor."

"You saw only two fellows, then?" slowly asked the gambler. "There ought to have been more in the gang, to get away with you three, all tough nuts to crack! And you can't exactly place either of the pair?"

"If that means, did I recognize them? No, senor! I would not know either were we to meet face to face. But—I believe they went in the direction of the landslide. They may have been caught by it, but I begin to feel otherwise, now I have grown cooler."

"They were tough devils, that much I know. They must have heard enough before attacking us, to be doubly dangerous if yet alive. So, senor, feeling the need of a trusty friend, on whose good arm I might place full dependence, I determined to trust you with the secret of the buried treasure."

"In return for which I'm to have a full half of the bonanza?"

"A full half, senor."

"And it amounts to at least a quarter of a million dollars?"

"More, rather than less—yes!"

"Shake, pardner!" said the gambler, and the two knaves crossed palms over the table with hearty good will.

With this clinching of the compact, Tom Ashley cast aside all suspicions as to the complete sincerity of the Californian, and from that moment he entered most heartily into the fight for the lost bonanza.

For some little time he put question after question to his ally, but as they mainly touched on points already brought before the reader with sufficient clearness for our purpose, there is no need to follow them, word by word.

Enough that, despite his efforts to clear away the mists, Ashley found it impossible to gain anything like a certain clew to the men who had overpowered the three rascals, just when Don Carlos felt most confident of perfect success.

"And you say that your girl and the old man don't stop in town?" the gambler asked, his brows drawn together in deep thought. "Where else can they be hanging out, then?"

"That is more than I can tell you, senor," with a frown to match. "With all my care, I have been unable to make the discovery."

"Reckon they're laying low anywheres about the Haunted Hacienda?"

Don Carlos gave a start at that suggestion, and half-started from his chair. But, before he could do or say more, a peculiar sound came echoing hollowly from an unknown quarter, and springing to his feet the Mint Sport crossed the room to the bed, putting his lips to a tube that ran up through the floor, asking:

"What's wanted?"

"You are, Ashley," came the hollow response.

"What for, and who by?"

"Don't know—Joe Bisbing!"

Don Carlos sprang up as he recognized that name, excitedly saying:

"Tis one of my men, senor! I left him on guard at the landslide, to bring word if any bodies were found! It must be—hasten, my dear friend! Lose not an instant!"

## CHAPTER XXII.

### THE KNIFE OF DON CARLOS.

THEY found the fat member awaiting their coming, and without giving him time to make known his business—not a difficult matter, for Joe Bisbing was puffing and blowing like a grampus from the haste he had made in carrying information to the master whose hand shed gold so freely—Tom Ashley led the rascal out under the stars.

"Pump him lively, pardner!" admonished the Mint Sport as he turned the fat man over to the Californian.

"Speak out, fellow! What brings you hither—eh?"

"Waal, thar was a feller what got ketched into the slide, an' we sorter figgered it out—that's pard an' me, you understand, boss?"

"Yes! Go on, thou sleepy tongue!" fumed the Californian, stamping a foot in hot impatience. "Only the one body found?"

"Jest the one when I left, an' him gittin' turrible lively, boss!"

"What! not dead?"

"He wasn't too dead fer to rip an' r'ar an' cavort all over a full acre, boss, callin' out fer his pard, which—"

"What sort of a looking fellow was he, Joe?" broke in Ashley.

"Big as a mount'in, boss, pritty nigh! An' hed mo' ha'r onto his upper eend then'd do to stuff a featherbed!"

"Can you place him, pardner?" turning to the Californian. "Reckon he was one of the—gang of road-agents?"

"Ef he wasn't, boss, then I don't want a cent!" exploded Bisbing, with vehemence. "An' Dave Terry kin say the same! Fer sure, boss!"

But Don Carlos shook his head, irresolutely. He could not say that he recognized the description, and seeing this Ashley added:

"We'll take a tramp over yonder, any way, pardner. Maybe you'll be able to place the critter after once getting his range. Then—if he wasn't one of the gang, how did he happen to get caught in the slide?"

"Thar was 'nother—a weenty one, so to speak, boss," volunteered Joe Bisbing, keeping pace with them as well as he could. "I hearn the big devil 'splain that it ketched him an' his pardner, but ef that was the how, what fer was he trompin' all over the rest o' the slide ruther then huntin' an' diggin' nighst to whar him own self was done ketched?"

"You are sure of this, Joe?" demanded Ashley, slackening his hot pace a bit. "I'll have your fat pelt for gridole-greasers if I catch you in even the ghost of a lie, you mind?"

"Cross the heart o' me, boss!"

"All right!" resuming his swift advance. "I reckon we've got on the track of one of your ducks, pardner! And, if so we'll mighty soon learn just what became of all the rest!"

Curiously enough, Don Carlos seemed far less enthusiastic, and in place of keeping in the lead, he might almost be said to hang back, at least until Ashley turned to him with a growl of impatience that might easily turn to actual suspicion.

"We want to git thar, pardner! The rest of



the outfit may turn up, and we'd look pretty coming in just as the game closed and the lights were turned out!"

"There was but the one, he said, senor, and—"

"One is heap sight better than nothing, though! And Joe said the big fellow was howling about a pardner, didn't he?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then, if two, why not four? And that about fills the bill, if you slung it at me straight, back yonder in my snuggery. Of course, Don Carlos, you wouldn't think of lying to a man whose grip you had squarely returned?"

"No, no, my dear friend!" declared the Californian, springing forward with quickened steps. "I would not lie to you, but—well, something warns me this big fellow is not the man we wish to find!"

"It's all in the day's work, pardner, and I'm not throwing away any chances with so big a stake on the board," grimly added the Mint Sport, with a glance over his shoulder to make sure Joe Bisbing had been distanced too completely for his ears to catch a hint of the truth. "We'll have a square look at this big fellow, anyway!"

If it had been any other, Don Carlos would have been far more eager to get ahead. But he felt a cold shiver of fear as he remembered how easily he had been handled by that giant at the ruins, and he had no wish to meet with any further experience in that line.

Still, he dared not falter, now. The Mint Sport, too, could prove a dangerous enemy, should the occasion arise, and his suspicions must be lulled at any cost.

It did not take many minutes to carry the couple to the spot where the landslide had wrought such a complete change in the landscape, and it did not take long for the keen eyes of Tom Ashley to pick out the person they had come in search of.

Fate timed their coming so that they caught the angry roar which Silver-tip Steve gave forth on being told of the black charges made against him and his nephew by Don Carlos Salcedo.

"Whar is he?" came thundering to their ears, and the next instant the maddened giant came around a rise in the tangled mass, meeting the two men almost face to face, but without recognizing either at first. "Whar'll I find the dirty whelp as tells sech cussed lies? Whar is he, I ax ye, critter?"

"Mark him, pardner!" hastily muttered Ashley, gripping an arm of the Californian and swinging him around to face the mad colossus. "Is he the critter that downed ye, over yonder?"

"I don't—I fail to recognize him, senor," muttered Don Carlos, stumbling over a root, and thus becoming separated by a space from the Mint Sport.

Either his voice was caught, or that trip drew the blazing eyes of Silver-tip Steve toward the Californian, for recognition was almost instant.

For a bit that herculean figure half-crouched as though to leap upon the Californian, but with a desperate effort Stephen Hurst held himself back, hoarsely crying out:

"You devil! give me back my boy!"

Don Carlos shrunk back, his hand flying to the silver hilt of his knife, the moonbeams reflected from its polished blade as the weapon was partly drawn from its sheath.

"I don't know you, senor."

"Give me back my boy, I tell you, dog!"

"Are you crazy, senor?"

"Crazy?" with a short, strange laugh, one hand flying up to pass across his brow. "If I am crazy, 'tis you that made me so. Only for you, devil, all would be— If my lad is dead, I'll kill you by inches at a time, Carlos Salcedo!"

Although with a deadly weapon in his own right hand, while the giant, his brain half-distracted with grief and rage, by no means lessened by the quantities of bad whisky he had swallowed, never seemed to think of the weapons at his waist, the Californian shrunk away as that wild figure moved toward him. Yet, in retreating slowly, Don Carlos was shrewd enough to edge around and gain higher ground, thus placing himself on a more equal footing with his enemy.

He had been sincere enough in declaring that he could not recognize one of his assailants in this sorely dilapidated figure, but at that angry pronunciation of his name, the truth flashed upon him, and without counting the cost, he cried out, viciously:

"Ha! I know ye now, villain! Thou art one of the road-agents who—"

"Liar!" cried Steve, springing forward, his hands outstretched to grip the Californian, his eyes glowing redly like those of an infuriated wild beast.

Swift as thought that glittering blade flew up—shot down and outward, its keen point leveled straight at that broad breast!

There was a shock of meeting, a brief but furious struggle, then Don Carlos uttered a shriek of angry horror as he was twisted from his footing, heaved aloft by those mighty arms, held

poised for an instant before being cast to earth with a terrible shock!

All this passed with wondrous rapidity, and before any one could interfere, the deed was done. And, the picture of vengeance, Silver-tip Steve seemed about to leap with all his weight upon his prostrate foe.

"Hold, right there!" cried Tom Ashley, his revolver coming to a level, staring Silver-tip fair in the eyes as the giant involuntarily paused. "Don't jump on a man when he's down, stranger."

"Who are you, to chip in?" hoarsely demanded the Hercules, one hand plucking the knife of Don Carlos from where it had caught in his garments when arrested by that strong arm.

Before the Mint Sport could answer, a shout came from beyond.

"Hyar's a hat, an' I reckon the head it b'longed to ain't so mighty fur off, neither. Whooray, lads, we'll find 'em yit!"

Silver-tip Steve gave a hoarse, inarticulate cry and darted off in that direction, mechanically thrusting the knife of Don Carlos into his belt as he did so. Ashley hesitated, but then replaced his pistol, to look after his recently-made ally. Don Carlos was not killed, although stunned, and calling help, Ashley had him carried to Hard Cash.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### A GHASTLY DISCOVERY.

MANUEL DIAZ might be old and withered, but he was by no means decrepit, as Nash Baldwin stood ready to bear witness, from that date on.

His movements were fairly panther-like, and while one hand held that keen point almost in contact with the young American's throat, the fingers of his other hand closed upon Baldwin's wrist with a vigor quite as painful as it was surprising.

It is an open question just what would have been the outcome, had there been none to interfere, but before Baldwin could fairly realize his peril, a low, angry ejaculation came to their ears, and Felipa came to the rescue with a rush.

"Manuel Diaz! Is it thus that thou—"

"Pardon, *nina*," and the old fellow drew back with a low bow, his ugly weapon vanishing from sight with marvelous rapidity.

"A guest, and thou wouldst repay his saving our lives by taken *his* away? If I thought so, Manuel Diaz—"

"Let it pass, I beg of you, Felipa," hastily interposed Baldwin, rallying in ample time to improve the opportunity. "Manuel was only playing a little joke, and no harm is done."

"You are very kind, senor," bowed the old fellow, with the ghost of a smile coming into his frost-bitten visage. "I was in earnest. If I could have detected even the faintest sign of treachery to my young mistress, there would be more steel than blood left in thy heart at this instant, senor!"

"Manuel Diaz!"

"'Tis true, *nina*," bowing meekly as he faced Felipa. "You were wiser than I, and from this time on I am dumb. The senor is true as steel. I had my finger on his pulse while the point of my knife was tickling his throat. His pulse was like a placid river; never a flutter, never a wave—he is true, *nina*! A coward or a traitor would have betrayed himself, then!"

With a still lower bow, which included both Felipa and Nash, Manuel Diaz glided away into the semi-darkness.

The young man was first to rally, laughing softly as he took possession of Felipa's hands.

"You are more like an invalid than I, in the face, Felipa. You are pale as—no! You are rosy now as you were white a moment ago! Was it because you thought my life in danger, dear friend?"

"I thought—it was in great peril, senor! You know not Manuel Diaz, senor, if you think his knife was drawn for idle show!"

"He was pledging me to ever prove true to you, Felipa," his voice growing softer, even as it grew more ardent. "As though I could ever prove false to an angel—"

"Stop, senor!" murmured Felipa, drawing her hands away with a swift movement, stepping back a pace or two. "I must not listen—you must not speak such words!"

"Never, do you mean, Felipa?"

Before Baldwin could win a reply, Manuel Diaz again drew near, announcing dinner. And as Felipa gladly welcomed the interruption, the old fellow found opportunity for whispering:

"He is true, *nina*! My finger was on his pulse, and I felt never a throb of treachery! So—senor," turning quickly toward Baldwin, to add with a profound bow: "You are the friend of my mistress; that makes you my master. In the eyes of thy servant, thou art no longer an Americano."

Further than this, courtesy could not go, and fully realizing as much, Baldwin played his part so well that, a few minutes later, when the trio were gathered about a plentiful meal, if humbly served, it was Manuel's self that touched upon the tabooed point.

"You have told the young master about our secret work, senorita?"

Felipa flashed an eager look into that wrinkled face, and a glad smile came into her own as Diaz bowed assent.

Young Baldwin saw all this, though he was wise enough to cover the fact, knowing that open curiosity could only injure the hopes he was already beginning to find so pleasant.

It was not so difficult to do. He was very hungry, after his busy experience, and the supply of food was as appetizing as it was plentiful. So, waiting the result of this little by-play, he prepared for another possible fast.

"He is true, *nina*," Manuel repeated, in low tones, but showing no particular desire to keep his meaning secret from the ears of the young adventurer. "I was an old fool, even while thinking myself so wise! It is a true heart, a strong hand, a powerful weapon to aid in the desperate fight against such heavy odds! So—tell the young master all, I counsel thee, oh, my mistress!"

As though eager to have the information given, Manuel Diaz drew back from the food-spread *serape*, quickly vanishing from sight amid the shadows lurking beyond the little circle of light cast forth by the small fire and the none too brilliant lantern depending by a bit of string from a point of rock.

"You have heard, Senor Nash?" softly asked the maiden, after a few moments of silence.

"Not unless you prefer that I should," smiled the young man, his blue eyes glad of the excuse for gazing fairly into her dark orbs.

"You must have noticed that, once or twice, I seemed at a loss to find the right words while telling you our story," added Felipa, her long lashes drooping, that charming flush coming back to her cheeks.

"You forget, Felipa; I was an invalid, and hence could not be expected to be very critical," smiled Baldwin. "Still, I vowed then, as I vow now, to make your cause my own, so far as a strong arm and a true heart goes. You will not reject them, Felipa?"

The answer did not come at once, and perhaps Baldwin was all the better pleased on that account. Swift acceptance might have overlooked the double meaning which could be attached to his words, and that would seriously have lessened the wild hopes he was coming to cherish.

His own heart beat faster as he noted the warm blood deepen the hue of those smooth cheeks, as he saw those long lashes tremble as her eyes vainly strove to meet his steady gaze.

He was a novice in the art of love, 'tis true, yet he could not well misinterpret those signs. And then came his hardest struggle; to restrain his own ardor, and by biding his time, make victory all the more assured in the end.

"You are very kind, senor," said Felipa, after a pause, well employed in regaining the composure she had so nearly lost. "You have already done so much, and we but strangers!"

"Strangers, Felipa?"

"Not now, but then," bravely lifting her eyes and meeting that ardent gaze without flinching. "You have given a pledge to hold secret whatever you may see and hear, in this cavern, Senor Nash, but that is all the vow I have taken from your lips. You are not enlisted in the fight we—poor Manuel and poorer me! are waging, for—"

"I am, unless you drive me out in the cold, Felipa!" quickly interposed Baldwin, his further words checked by that uplifted hand.

"Wait, senor! You must not offer—I will not accept any vow save the one I just mentioned, at least until you have learned all I felt obliged to keep from your knowledge while telling our story, a little while ago."

"If you say so, Felipa, all right. I will listen to all you may say, and be glad to do so. But—when you have finished, then you must listen to me, in turn. Will you Felipa?"

"If—if you insist, senor," murmured the maiden, her lids drooping once again, her fingers trembling as they toyed with the food on the blanket between them.

But they drew quickly back as those of the young man came in contact with them, seemingly by accident, as he reached for another morsel of food. He looked at her half-reproachfully, but Felipa was not to be entrapped so easily. She drew back a little, deftly rolling a cigarette as she began to speak:

"I did not tell you aught about this place, Senor Nash, while giving you our story, yet—'tis almost the main point! When thy hunger is fully appeased, senor," bowing as she dropped the cigarette on the *serape* before Nash. "And it was of this cavern and its connections that you heard Manuel Diaz make allusions, a bit ago."

"I have won his confidence, if not yours, Felipa!" with a half-reproachful sigh. "He was most bitter at first, then gradually softened; while you—just the reverse!"

Felipa shrunk away, then as quickly rallied, and Baldwin saw that he had made a serious mistake. He tried to speak, but an imperious gesture checked him.

"Wait, senor! I have an explanation to make, and with so much lying ahead, time is very precious. As I started to say, this cavern forms a most important link in the fight I am



making for the treasure my honored father was forced to leave behind when driven from his native land.

"Manuel Diaz remembered the cave, when all other plans failed to recover the treasure; and after careful calculations, he declared that it might be possible for us to win the fight, by driving a tunnel from that point of the cavern nearest the building under or close to which the hidden bonanza must be lying.

"We made the attempt, senior, only after the most thorough examination and careful calculations, guiding our labors by compass. And we have known but little rest since striking the first blow with pick and shovel, up to the hour when most bitter disappointment befell!"

"Your calculations proved wrong, Felipa?" exclaimed Nash, greatly interested in that strange story.

"Not so, senior. But—the tunnel came to an end, almost a week since, by breaking into a cellar over which stands the Mint!"

Baldwin gave a start of amazement, but Felipa anticipated his words.

"We guarded against discovery as quickly as possible, senior, thanks to Manuel Diaz and his fertile brain. We closed the break: just how, you may see with your own eyes, in time."

"But you couldn't follow that scheme any further, of course?"

"We did, senior, though it seems so impossible. We trusted to the saints to preserve us from discovery, and whenever we dared—which was but too seldom!—we still sought for the lost treasure. We were able to work only when all was still in the gambling-room: only during the few hours when there was no game: but even yet we did not despair of carrying out the sacred duty bequeathed me by my sainted mother.

"We labored, Manuel and I, as best we could, still following the compass, until the end came! Until we struck against a huge mass of rock, which completely barred our further progress!"

"Even then we fought against despair, senior. There was one frail chance left us, and—I insisted on taking it, though Manuel begged me not. That was to risk all our remaining gold on the cards, hoping to be favored by the saints, hoping to win the establishment itself! If so, we could then do as we willed with the property, and none could say us nay, or question our motives!"

"You failed, I think you told me, Felipa?"

"I failed—yes! Then came our meeting, senior, at the ruins, when you so generously risked your life in defense of the helpless!"

Nash Baldwin found it no easy task to choke back the words that fought for utterance, but with his recent mistake still fresh in his memory, he could not afford to risk yet another. So he said, instead:

"The treasure belongs to you, by every right, human and divine: then, why not lay open claim to it, Felipa?"

"You forget, senior," with unusual bitterness coming into her face and voice. "This is California, and we are only—*Greasers!*"

At that instant Manuel Diaz came hastily into the light, strangely excited, bearing a ghastly relic in his outstretched hands: a human skull, with bits of dirt still clinging to its surface.

"See, my poor mistress!" he cried, in grim, tragic tones as the skull fell from his hands to the *serape*. "Here is the end of all our hopes! 'Tis to this thy treasure hath turned, poor *nina!*"

#### CHAPTER XXIV.

##### THE SKULL AWAKENS FRESH FEARS.

WITH a little, gasping cry, Felipa shrunk away from that ghastly relic as it dropped to the blanket, but Nash Baldwin, possibly from a natural desire to display his strong nerves before the eyes of one whom he was fast learning to love with all the ardor of his honest nature, coolly picked up the skull, brushing from the fleshless bones such particles of dirt as remained, saying nothing, while Manuel Diaz hurriedly explained what had happened.

"'Tis only too true, *nina*. I was working there, while you were explaining all to the senior—you have done so, Felipa?"

The maiden nodded her head, unwilling to trust her tongue, unable to withdraw her startled gaze from that grim relic of a yet nameless tragedy.

Manuel Diaz heaved a heavy sigh, brushing a hand across his damp brow. That alone bore evidence to his having received an unusually severe shock, in one so withered, so dried up.

"I was working along the face of that thrice accursed rock, seniorita," he swiftly added, "hoping against hope that there was some error in the calculation I made before beginning the tunnel on the further side of that doubly accursed cellar! Then—*pouf!*" sending out a mighty breath of air, and flinging up his hands dramatically. "Down upon my head and shoulders fell a mass of earth, and that skull dropped squarely into my hands!"

"Was it alone, Diaz?" asked Baldwin, glancing up to that excited face. "I mean, was there no skeleton attached to the skull?"

Manuel made a wry grimace, then frankly replied:

"I did not stop to see, senior. I was too badly frightened!"

Baldwin laughed softly, more to hearten up Felipa, however, than because he found anything particularly mirthful in the subject.

"I don't know as I blame you, Diaz, for being startled. And yet—this is a country where one is apt to stumble across many such objects. California has many more graves than graveyards!"

"But this—this came from the exact spot where the Del Cagatinta treasure was buried, senior!"

"I thought you had lost your course? At least, that mass of rock seems to prove as much. If so large, it surely could not have been placed by or over the grave of this poor fellow, as a tombstone!"

Manuel Diaz made no reply, in words, but the manner in which he glared at the skull, wagging his grizzled head the while, betrayed how completely the odd incident had awakened his native superstition. At that moment, he would have sworn on the cross-bilt of his knife, that the devil or his evil imps had transformed the secret bonanza into this grim relic.

While speaking, Nash Baldwin had been unconsciously scraping with a thumb-nail at a portion of the skull where a crust of some sort had clung more tightly than the rest. He glanced downward, giving a short cry of surprise at what his eyes discovered: a plate of some discolored metal, which had taken place of part of the bone on top.

"What is it, Senior Nash?" quickly panted Felipa, seeming to forget her first terrors as aroused by that ghastly discovery. "You are not—'tis not a serpent, a venomous—you are not bitten?"

Baldwin hastened to reassure the maiden, holding the skull where the light of the lantern fell more fully across it, pointing out the object which had so taken him by surprise.

"'Tis nothing so strange, after all," he explained, tapping the metal plate with a finger-nail. "Whoever this poor fellow may have been in life, he must have had his share of perils. See! his skull was once badly injured, and had to be trepanned!"

Manuel Diaz shook his grizzled head, ominously, an entirely different explanation occurring to him.

That bit of metal was all that remained of the great Del Cagatinta treasure. The foul fiend had left his malicious work incomplete, from carelessness, lack of time, or—and he inclined to this explanation—that when the bonanza should come to be reclaimed, no mistake might be made as to what had been its fate!

By this time Felipa had rallied from the shock, and her pale face betrayed fresh cause for worry.

"You found it close by the rock, Manuel?"

"As I said, *nina*," in lugubrious tones. "It fell plump into my hands, and grinned up into my face as though—cast it away, senior! The foul fiend sent it to mock our hopes! Cast it aside, I pray thee, before Satan can work us still more bitter evil!"

Baldwin placed the skull on one side, but that was the extent of his compliance. He meant to give that ghastly relic a more careful examination before it was finally disposed of.

"And—it was very near the spot where your calculations located the treasure, Manuel?" persisted his young mistress.

"At the very spot, *nina!*"

Felipa bowed her head, hiding her face in her joined hands for a few seconds. Then, forcing a wan smile, she looked up at Baldwin, saying:

"The fight is at an end, Senior Nash! It is no longer a question as to whether you shall enlist under our banner, for there remains nothing now to fight for!"

"Then you think—" hesitated the young man. "Is it not perfectly plain, Senior Nash? Those who dug the grave in which to bury the remains of him who once owned yonder skull, found the treasure my honored father hid away so many long years ago!"

"I can't think that, Felipa!" quickly exclaimed Baldwin, rising to his feet in his earnestness. "If the owner of this skull came to his death by the hands of enemies, they would be too greatly joyed at making such a marvelous discovery to think of completing a grave."

"But—if placed there by friends, senior?"

"They might take away the treasure, if found, but they surely would never put the body of a friend in its place, to have his remains disturbed by those who, sooner or later, were sure to come for their gold. And that is why I say—never despair so soon, my good friends! I firmly believe that, in place of being lost, the battle is almost won!"

Manuel Diaz shook his head once more, but less positively than at first. He was loth to give up his marvelous explanation, but—this young Americano was not such a fool, after all!

As for Felipa, her face grew clearer, her courage coming back as she drank in those spirited yet logical words. It sounded reasonable, and none the less so from coming out of those lips.

"It may be—I will try to hope yet a little longer, senior!" she said her lustrous eyes giving far more eloquent thanks than her tongue dared

shape, just then. "You have the paper on which the calculations are marked out, Tio Manuel?"

"'Tis here, seniorita," replied Diaz, tapping his breast. "What is your will, my mistress?"

"Not now, though," with a rapid change of mind. "After a while, perhaps Senior Nash will be so kind as to look the paper over with us?"

"Gladly, good friends, but I'm not much of a hand at figures, and I fancy we can do more good, just now, by taking a look at the spot where Manuel found this relic," giving a passing glance toward the skull.

"You think, then, senior?" hesitated Felipa.

"I think it is barely possible that Manuel may have gone just a little astray in making his tunnel," was the frank response. "Working in the dark, and especially after meeting with such an ugly and unexpected obstacle as the cellar you spoke of, 'twould be a marvel if he didn't!"

"It sounds reasonable, seniorita," admitted Diaz, though still reluctant to accept such a prosaic explanation as this. "Still, 'twill do no harm to take the look. 'Tis the quiet hour, in that cursed gold-devouring den!"

As he spoke, the old man reached up and took down the lantern, giving it a little shake to make sure it contained oil enough for their venture, then glanced toward his young mistress.

"We follow, Tio Manuel," Felipa nodded, shyly touching Nash Baldwin on an arm as she said, in lower tones: "Pardon, senior, but the way is rough and not so easy for untrained feet. Will my hand trouble you?"

"Not a bit of it?" heartily replied the young fellow, giving it a warm squeeze while drawing the dainty member through his arm. "I'd be far more sorely troubled without it, dear Felipa!" His mustached lips actually brushing her little ear as they moved off after Diaz.

There was no response, possibly because Felipa feared to disturb their guide, who was swiftly picking his way over the none too easy route. And, wiser than he had been before that other mistake, Baldwin did not venture further along that pleasant path; so different from the one their feet were treading, though!

Still, he was sane enough to express the admiration which he really felt at the ingenious mask—a blanket, heavily plastered with mud and bits of stone, to match the walls of the cellar—formed by Diaz to conceal the mouth of his tunnel. They passed through into the cellar, but before he could take much note, a sudden uproar broke out over their heads, amidst which Baldwin recognized the voice of the Sky-scraper!

#### CHAPTER XXV.

##### "IN THE NAME OF THE LAW!"

WITHOUT giving a second thought to Don Carlos Salcedo or the Mint Sport who had come to his defense, the Sky-scraper dashed off in the direction from whence had come that shout of discovery.

He was hardly accountable for his actions just then, and should not be judged according to the common standard.

His experience, since the first premonitory shiver of that mighty landslide, had been more than sufficient to wreck nine brains out of every ten. Although he had fought his way out of that living grave with but slight injury to his person, he was far from being his usual self, and might not recover entirely from that terrible ordeal for weeks to come. Then, too, the whisky was doing its evil work.

Silver-tip Steve had said nothing to Nash Baldwin, while turning over the long-sealed pages of the past, about his most insidious foe; but strong drink, in those days of bitter black despair, had brought him nearer to death's door than all the enemies he afterward faced on the red fields of battle.

He did not mention, what was the fact, that his insanity was stated to be caused fully as much by strong drink as by grief and long-delayed vengeance. And he had been equally reticent on those later days, after the war was over, while he was searching in vain for the lost miner and his bonanza; the wild, roaring days which had fastened upon him the title of the "Sky-scraper from Siskiyou."

All that had been changed when Stephen Hurst hastened home, to find his sister-in-law dead, and himself left sole guardian to her son; his sole surviving relative.

From that day to this eventful night, strong drink had never crossed his lips. Now—urged on by men who meant to be friendly, he drank time and again, until the old demons entered his unsteady brain, leaving him little better than a madman.

He looked more than ever like one, now, as he rushed over to where stood the man who had made that discovery, fairly snatching from his hands the battered covering which—ay! Nash Baldwin had worn it only a few hours earlier on that very night!

"Where—show me where!" hoarsely gasped the wild man; with his blazing eyes, his tangled mane of hair and flying beard, his hurried pantings, his swift yet erratic movements, he could not well be called less than wild.



"Right thar, pardner," came the reply, and the fellow indicated a spot only a few yards from where a huge mass of rock stood as though it had formed a barrier against which that avalanche had split.

He relinquished the trophy readily enough, and rather fell back than bore the giant company in his rush to the spot. True, he had neither seen nor heard aught of that brief altercation which ended so disastrously for Don Carlos Salcedo, but there was enough in the face and actions of Stephen Hurst, just then, to frighten any ordinary man. And, only an instant later, a friend called hastily to him:

"All eyes open, pard! That crazy critter hes done bu'sted one pore critter wide open, an'—"

They both hurried away to watch the arrangements being made by Tom Ashley to transport his senseless ally to the Mint.

Silver-tip Steve never gave them glance nor thought. He paused by that sheltering rock, staring almost stupidly around. He did not call aloud upon his missing nephew. Half-crazed though he was, he had reason enough left to know that, had Nash Baldwin been anywhere within sound of his voice, they would have been reunited long ere this.

He struck one of his few remaining matches. By its flickering glow he scanned the ground under and hard by that rock. He caught sight of footprints in the recently disturbed dirt, but could not say that any of these had been made by his missing nephew.

Then his last match burned out, Silver-tip mounted guard over the spot, warning away the few who, urged by curiosity, came in that direction, on one occasion roaring out fiercely:

"Back, ye devils! Dare to trample on the grave of my boy, and I'll tear ye limb from limb! Back, ye devils, I say!"

And so the rest of that night passed away, with the colossus keeping lonely vigil on the earthen ruin, overlooking the ruin of rocks beyond.

With the first break of dawn, Old Steve began searching the space around the standing rock, hoping against hope that some positive signs might be found to assure him that, like himself, Nash Baldwin had in some miraculous manner escaped with life from that horrible rush and crush of matter.

He could not know as much, of course, but that vigil had been held on the very spot where Nash Baldwin had been saved, had been cared for by Felipa del Cagatinta, until the approaching cries of the people from Hard Cash forced them to flight.

But there was nothing to tell Stephen Hurst all this. He may have gazed at their tracks, among others; if so, he failed to recognize them. The standing stone had been visited by perhaps a dozen of the curious searchers, that night, before the giant took possession, and their trampling feet had hopelessly tangled up the trail.

Long before he gave over that search, Silver-tip Steve had abandoned all hope of ever finding his nephew alive. He could no longer doubt his having been caught and buried by that landslide. Over and over again he told himself that the body must be recovered, for a Christian burial, but—there was something else to be done before!

Something else—but what? Something else—if he could only remember!

It was Jack Minter—honest Jack, whose vilely-friendly hand had first pressed him to drink—who unwittingly gave his dazed memory direction, when he returned from Hard Cash, refreshed by a hearty breakfast. Now, as then, the rather sluggish-witted fellow never dreamed of sowing evil, and merely as a bit of ordinary news, alluded to the Greaser Sport, who had met with such rough handling that night.

"He's on his trotters ag'in, they say, pardner," as he made a proffer of his replenished flask. "I do reckon it'll be a lonesome while afore the critter'll chin any more 'bout road-agents, anyway in the face o' ye!"

Steve mechanically accepted the flask, drinking heavily before passing it back to its loquacious owner. He said nothing in reply. He did not seem to see or even hear the fellow, for he moved away, striding long and swiftly, his face turned in the direction of Hard Cash!

That was what he had been trying in vain to puzzle out; it was a *man* he must find, before resurrecting his buried nephew. A *man*; that was all his nearly-turned brain could gather, just now. A *man*—but what man, what name, and what for—he could not yet determine.

"I must find him, first!" he sluggishly said, below his breath. "I will know him when I see his eyes. He is in town. I must find him. I must find him!"

And so Stephen Hurst entered Hard Cash, bare of head, his face hidden under a mask of mingled dirt and dried blood, his hair and beard making him resemble some wild beast erect on its hind legs, rather than a human being.

If he was drunken, his movements did not show it. He walked easily, his movements were swift, smooth, steady. Only those blazing eyes, that slightly thickened tongue, betrayed him.

From saloon to saloon he passed, asking no questions until questioned first, then drinking, paying, departing after a keen look into each man's face.

Of course the story of the landslide and its thrilling accompaniments had long since spread throughout Hard Cash, and among the rest had been told that curious meeting between the Greaser Sport and the man who had been caught in the landslide. So, almost as a matter of course, word was not long in reaching both Tom Ashley and Don Carlos Salcedo that the "big fellow was in town, looking for somebody!"

"That means *you*, pardner, for sure!" nodded the Mint Sport, with a hard, dry laugh. "Reckon you want to try him another whirl?"

"I'll kill him—kill him on sight!" snarled Don Carlos, but with a sickly pallor coming into his bruised face.

Ashley shrugged his shoulders, like one who has his own opinion, but then he fell to work. If one of the two men had to die, it must be the giant, since the Californian was worth far the most in his eyes; until that hidden bonanza was more accurately placed! Yet—the Sky-scraper was too valuable a possibility not to be preserved for use, in case that could be brought about.

It was owing to this swift reasoning and what followed after, that a sturdy, hard-featured man stepped up in front of Stephen Hurst as he issued from a saloon, speaking sharply:

"I reckon you're my man, stranger! Don't try to kick, or I'll have to cripple ye, and I'd hate mighty to do that!"

"What ye want o' me, critter?" slowly demanded Hurst, staring half-vacantly into that resolute face.

"I've got word to arrest you, and here's my authority," at the same time showing his badge of city marshal, and dropping a hand to the butt of an ever ready revolver.

Contrary to his expectations, and not a little to his relief, Silver-tip Steve showed no signs of resisting his authority, simply asking what charge had been recorded against his name, and who made it?

"Playing road-agent, and Carlos Salcedo makes the charge."

A wonderful change came into that dirt-masked face, and Silver-tip Steve was once more himself. He knew now who he had been searching for! He knew now who it was he must find before renewing his hunt for the corpse of his idolized nephew!

"Whar is he? Take me to the critter, stranger!" he rumbled, paying no attention to the pistol which the officer had jerked forth as he recoiled from that awful change in face and manner.

"Steady! I'll blow you through if you attempt to resist!"

"You?" Laughing shortly, something like contempt coming into eyes and voice. "You don't count. I want to see the man who accuses me of being a road-agent. Take me to *him*, and if he says as much to my face, you can lock me up, and I'll never lift a finger to prevent!"

"Honest, now?" asked the marshal, with an air of relief.

"Take me to the man, I bid ye, critter!" his eyes winning back that red glow. "I'll walk with ye—hands off! I'm not under arrest until Carlos Salcedo tells ye to my very face I'm the road-agent!"

It was a bit contrary to his ordinary high-handed manner of conducting an arrest, but the marshal was a shrewd judge of human nature, and knew that, should it come to open resistance, he would have to kill or be slain himself. And so, after a brief hesitation, he walked peacefully, side by side with Silver-tip Steve, toward the Mint, where he felt pretty well assured Don Carlos was to be found.

The marshal was right. Both Salcedo and Ashley were in the saloon when its door was reached, and then, before the officer could decide just how he ought to make the introduction, the Sky-scraper took the matter out of his hands, by acting for himself.

With a rapid stride the giant entered the bar, his gaze fixing on the Californian as the two friends started aside at recognizing him.

There were a number of others in the room, but Stephen Hurst had eyes only for Salcedo, just then. And in cold, harsh tones he addressed the Californian, who seemed half paralyzed by that unexpected appearance.

"You've laid a charge ag'in me, this critter tells, Carlos Salcedo. What do you charge me with doin'?"

"Of robbing me—of being a road-agent!" viciously replied the other, plucking up courage as he saw Ashley, with others, slipping around to cut off all retreat by means of the open front door.

"You lie, devil!" thundered the Hercules, with one long stride fastening his mighty grip upon the shrinking villain. "You murdered my boy! Down—to death, curse ye!" he howled, heaving Salcedo above his head, then casting him savagely to the floor, with a terrible shock.

At the same moment he saw Ashley and others barring his way, and to guard his rear, he leaped over the bar, just as the Mint Sport flung up a revolver and fired a shot.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

## ONE OF THE SKULL'S SECRETS.

THESE were the sounds that so startled Nash Baldwin almost the moment he had passed under the curiously contrived mask by means of which Manuel Diaz hoped to prevent a premature discovery of the tunnel those two had wrought out with such high hopes.

He instantly recognized the voice of his uncle, and snatching the lantern from the old man's hand, Baldwin turned its brightest light toward the further end of the cellar, just as the building above them shook and shivered with the shock of Salcedo's fall.

The light showed him a pair of rude, frail steps leading down from the flooring above, but scarcely had he noted this much, when a truly remarkable event took place.

The floor opened, and the crouching figure of a man came plunging downward, his great weight, added to the shock of his jump, crushing the pine steps to splinters!

Recognition was instant, and swiftly shifting the lantern so his own face was plainly revealed, Baldwin hastily called out:

"Uncle Steve—this way!"

"Nash—thank God!"

It was doubly fortunate that all those in the saloon were so greatly excited, even Ashley believing that the Sky-scraper had simply sought cover for his person by crouching below the level of the bar, and sending a couple of shots through the wood in hopes of killing or disabling the dangerous fellow, before springing around to the open end of the counter for a sure shot.

Under cover of all this racket, those glad cries escaped being heard, and the recognition was complete on both sides before Ashley began to suspect the full meaning of the crash following the giant's unexpected leap across the bar.

"Through the trap—into the cellar, by jingo!" he cried, savagely, as the strange truth burst upon his excited brain.

Steve caught those words, and instead of rushing at once to the outstretched arms of his nephew, he turned, and drawing a revolver, sent shot after shot up through the broken trap-door. The crash and splintering of glassware followed, mingling with cries of warning from half a dozen voices.

"Come an' take me, ye hounds!" roared the giant at the top of his mighty voice. "I'm Silver-tip Steve, the Sky-scraper from Siskiyou! I'm hungry for man-meat, an' this is my eatin' time! Come an' taste my wool, ye little curs! An'—send the Greaser Sport fer the fu'st nip!"

Two more shots he sent upward, creating more damage to fixtures if none to flesh, then turned toward his nephew, whose death he had so characteristically mourned.

The young man was fairly swallowed up in that mighty embrace, his hasty warning smothered by that mass of hair as Stephen Hurst kissed the one being on earth whom his seared heart could love; kissed him as he would never have kissed one of the other sex.

"My boy! Alive—safe and sound? Good enough!" with a low, more natural laugh than had passed his lips since all those adventures began. "Together, you and I can whip the whole town!"

By this time both Felipa and Manuel Diaz had fairly recognized the giant who had so gallantly defended them in time of need, and being less upset than either of the relatives, they hastily advised flight, by means of the disguised tunnel.

"Hasten!" murmured Felipa, clinging to Baldwin's arm and hurrying him toward the tunnel, as several shots came splintering through the floor over their heads. "For love of Mary Mother—I beg thee make haste, Senor Nash!"

As quickly as possible Baldwin explained her meaning to the giant, who was nowise loth to accept a chance for life, which he had not deemed possible up to that moment. All he could see before them was a stubborn fight to the death.

But now he had time to recognize the other inmates of the cellar, and when Manuel Diaz opened the tunnel mask, he only paused long enough to emit his bearish roar, sending a couple of shots back in answer to those fired above; then the quartette passed through the ingenious door, which Manuel Diaz closed and secured behind them, hastily saying:

"Go with them, *nina*! Leave me the light to fix the spring-trap! Go—and keep thy little ears open for the signal, should it come—which may the saints forbid!"

Linked together by their hands, with Felipa acting as guide, the trio were not long in making their way through the utter darkness to a point from whence the first dim reflection of the fire could be detected.

"It's all right, Uncle Steve," hastily muttered Baldwin, detecting that suspicion of danger ahead before the Sky-scraper could speak. "It is where I was brought, after the landslide."

"And—you are alive, lad? I ain't dreamin' of it all? I won't wake clean up ag'in ef I should happen fer to stub the toe o' me?" almost doubtfully muttered the veteran, gripping that hand more firmly, as though fearful lest both it and the body attached might fade away into nothingness.

"Tell him all, Senor Nash," said Felipa, drop-



ping his hand as they gained the fireside. "There is time enough. If those ladrones are to follow, be sure we will have ample warning for further flight."

Before Nash could interfere, had he seen fit to do so, Felipa glided away, evidently with the intention of returning to where Manuel Diaz was arranging his "spring-trap," whatever that might mean.

The fire was burning low, and though there was fuel hard by in abundance, neither of the two men saw fit to replenish the flames. If they were to be pursued by Salcedo, Ashley and Company, perhaps it would be better that the fire died out entirely.

This was hardly thought of just then, however. Uncle and nephew had so many questions to ask, so much to explain, that time was all too brief for aught else.

Still, it did not take long for the relatives to come to a tolerably clear understanding, though it was difficult for Nash to refrain from dwelling at length upon the noble manner in which Felipa had saved his life, almost at the expense of her own.

In his turn, Silver-tip Steve told what he could recall of his escape, his vain search for the body of his nephew, the meeting with Salcedo. This led to the arrest on charge of being a road-agent, and a brief account of what had taken place in the Mint bar.

It was at this point that Felipa returned, and as she threw a few dry sticks upon the fire, its renewed blaze revealed the skull which Manuel Diaz had discovered after such a curious fashion.

Steve gave a start, seemingly at a loss to account for the presence of such a ghastly relic, and noting this, Baldwin gave him a brief account of its discovery.

While his nephew was talking, Stephen Hurst picked up the skull, turning it over in his hands—to give another and still more violent start as his keen gaze rested on that metal plate.

"Whoever he was, the poor fellow must have had his full share of adventures, Uncle Steve," added Baldwin, pointing out the plate. "There must be a curious story connected with this relic, which I'd give a good deal to hear in full!"

Old Steve bent his head closer to the fire, scraping at the plate with his nail. Then—with a gasp he sunk to the rock floor, his head bowed, his gigantic frame shivering violently.

"Uncle Steve!" cried Baldwin, alarmed by this sudden weakness. "What's the matter? Speak—you are hurt! Those devils hit you when they shot?"

The last words came as his hand touched a damp spot among that mass of tangled hair, the firelight revealing a stain of blood upon his fingers as he involuntarily recoiled. But Stephen Hurst, rallying with a desperate effort, looked up into that scared face with a wan, forced smile, saying:

"That don't count, lad! It's barely a graze and I never felt it until your fingers found it out."

"You're trying to fool me! It *must* be more—it turned you so faint, that your face looked like that of a corpse!"

"I tell you 'tis nothing, lad!" with a touch of irritation in his voice as he jerked his head away from that exploring touch. "If anything 'twas the shock of coming through that floor—or the stopping so suddenly, rather!" forcing a laugh, even as his eyes dropped once more to that skull.

It seemed to fairly fascinate him, and as this fact thrust itself upon his notice, Baldwin caught a sudden suspicion.

"Uncle Steve, do you know whose skull that was, in life?"

"Do I know—don't be foolish, lad! Do I know—yes!" with a strange glow filling his eyes as he held up the skull to the firelight and pointed out what had so far escaped Baldwin's notice: a scar or closed cut in the bones. "I know this—see! The poor fellow was murdered, and *this* did the foul deed! Here—yes," his voice changing swiftly, like one holding something back! "The poor fellow was killed!"

## CHAPTER XXVII.

### JERRY BLACK SOLVES THE PUZZLE.

FOR a man who was so confident that he held the key to the situation, Tom Ashley "tumbled over his own conceit" very badly!

Taken by surprise as he was by that abrupt entrance of the wild-eyed giant, he saw in him but a single man, after all, and if such had seemed his wisest plan, the Mint Sport could easily have dropped him in his tracks.

As already hinted, Ashley reasoned that Silver-tip Steve a prisoner, would be worth far more to him than Silver-tip Steve a corpse, and it was solely for that reason the gambler made his swift, silent flanking movement, getting between the accused and his only open means of escaping from the bar-room.

Then came that irresistible assault upon the Californian, which gave Tom Ashley his first clear estimate of what the big fellow really was when thoroughly angered.

Ashley threw up his pistol-hand, but the strug-

gling figure of Don Carlos covered the giant, and when he came to the floor with such terrible violence, the shock partly upset the gambler as well.

He recovered in time to take a snap-shot at the Sky-scraper, while in the act of clearing the bar, but the lead flew a bit too high, and only stung without killing.

What followed, served to completely muddle the usually cool, clear, steady brain of the Mint Sport, and when he fairly realized what had taken place, he could only spit forth his fury in hot curses.

It was quite enough to cast any man off his balance, taken in a heap, nor was this disagreeable surprise lessened when Silver-tip Steve sent his lead flying up among the costly glass-ware, one bullet glancing from the heavy neck of a decanter and making a costly "star" near the center of the plate-glass mirror back of the bar.

This came just as Tom Ashley partly recovered from the surprise of finding his game "gone below," and just as he was about to follow with a mad rush, hoping to win the game before his adversary could recover from the shock of that fall.

The Mint Sport recoiled before those damaging shots, feeling almost as though one or more of the bullets had found his person; as they surely would had he been an instant earlier, or Silver-tip Steve a little less prompt in giving his reckless defiance.

The unusual disturbance—for the partners maintained pretty strict order in the establishment over which they presided, both night and day—brought Dan Collins from his chamber overhead, without pausing to dress, further than jumping into his trousers and belt of arms, gaining the bar-room just as his partner staggered back from behind the bar.

"Steady, pard! and who's kicking up all this racket?" he cried, sharply, as he caught Tom Ashley in one arm, his other hand gripping a ready revolver.

This it was that granted time for Silver-tip Steve and Nash Baldwin to meet and greet each other, the partners being eagerly watched by the little group of men who had chanced to be inside the bar when Steve put in an appearance.

Among them was the fairly bewildered city marshal, all the more helpless now because it was such an unheard of thing for a prisoner to slip through his grip, after being squarely arrested.

Tom Ashley began a hasty explanation, and as Dan Collins flashed his black eyes in that direction, the marshal suddenly bethought himself of the Greaser Sport, who lay near the door, showing no signs of life after that terrific fall.

"Don't crowd—give him air! Back, you—want me to run you in, too?" with a savage frown upon a ragged, dirty, dilapidated specimen of humanity who chanced to touch an elbow as he bent over the Californian.

"I hain't done nothin' fer to be run in, an' ef ye was to do that, I'd be *one*, 'stead o' *two*, from the looks, cully!" retorted the "old timer," Jerry Black.

By the time Tom Ashley had explained the situation to his partner, Silver tip Steve was ready to give his enemies another hint that all was lively at his end of the string.

Collins scowled—he took brief note of the damage done the bar fixtures, but he made no decided move toward putting an end to the racket.

"You know the contract, pardner," he said, grimly. "It's *your* loss, not *mine*, but I'd advise you to stop the racket mighty quick."

"But how?" snarled the Mint Sport, white as a sheet from anger.

"Get him out o' there, of course."

"But *how*? How'm I going to do it, man?"

"It's your say so, not mine. If 'twas, I'd get him out o' that, if I had to go after him single-handed!"

With those words, Dan Collins fell back a little, leaning almost listlessly against the curtained archway dividing the bar from the gaming-room, his apparent indifference raising the temper of his partner up to boiling pitch.

There was no excuse for his asking an explanation of that hint. Their business contract plainly read that each member was responsible for good order during the hours he was on duty, or in his half of the twenty-four hours. If any loss occurred, the partner in charge was bound to make it good.

Ashley looked for the marshal, but that worthy seemingly deemed it a safer job to care for a seemingly dead man, than to capture a positively live one, which he proceeded to do by dragging Don Carlos Salcedo out from the saloon, then hurrying off in quest of a doctor.

Half wild with rage and indecision, Tom Ashley jerked forth a pistol and sent bullet after bullet through the floor, aiming in different directions on the rare chance of killing or disabling the giant.

"So much more for putty to plug the holes up, pardner!" laughed Dan Collins, actually beginning to enjoy the dilemma, on the keen horns of which the Mint Sport was being so disagreeably tossed.

Tom Ashley turned a red-hot look at his mate,

but before he could let fly the retort that trembled on the tip of his tongue, Silver-tip Steve returned the compliment by sending a brace of bullets through the floor, one of them causing Jerry Black to skip and caper with an activity marvelous in one of his age, particularly as the fumes of his recent "heavy drunk" were still befogging his brains.

"Fa'r play, dug-gun ye to blazes an' all the way back!" he spluttered, backing up against the wall, lifting a foot and shaking it as though some venomous insect or reptile had found lodgment up his trousers leg. "Hit the critters as is fightin' of ye, not a peaceable outsider! Or—ef ye *boun'* to do that, come at him into his open face, not— Look at that, boss!" bringing his foot still higher for inspection, then twisting his body until he could plant a stumpy forefinger on the scar made by a bullet in the heel of his cowhide boot. "Will ye jes' look at that, I'm ax'in' of ye, boss!"

The Mint Sport glanced at the indignant old-timer, but that was all. He had thoughts only for the ugly enigma with which he stood confronted. How was he to get the Sky-scraper out of the cellar?

There was no longer any thought of keeping the giant alive, until he could use him as a check against possible lies on the part of Don Carlos Salcedo. He must be removed, but how?

He glanced again in the direction of his partner, but Collins was grimly immovable.

"It's your game, Tom: run it! I'm not saying how you ought to do the trick, because I can't see just how my own self. But—get him out o' that!"

Despite his vicious anger, the Mint Sport could not entirely smother a laugh at this characteristic coolness on the part of the dark-faced sport. And, though it by no means rendered the situation any the less complicated, that laugh did him good.

"You're rubbing it in mighty hard, pardner!" he nodded, then giving his drooping mustaches a fierce tug. "If on anything like open ground, it'd be easy enough, but *here*—the big devil could plug a round dozen men before he could be killed!"

"Looks that way, pard, but—*get him out o' that!*"

"I say, you big fellow!" called out Ashley, then gliding swiftly past the end of the bar, close to the broken trap-door through which admission to the cellar was had, hoping to locate and win a shot at the giant when he should make reply.

None such came. All was grimly silent in the cellar. But Silver-tip Steve had furnished plenty of evidence that his fall had not disabled him in the least, and that very silence was worse than the keenest retort in words could have been.

"I say, boss!" chipped in the old-timer, Jerry Black, tiptoeing over the bullet-pierced floor as Ashley slowly backed away from the trap. "What ye reckon it's wu'th, ef a critter was to show ye a way fer to git that p'izen critter out o' that?"

"Maybe *you* can do it?" snarled the angry sport, flashing a hot glance into that ill-favored face.

"Mebbe I wouldn't mind tryin', ef you'd make it wu'th the trouble, boss," coolly added the bummer, in no sense daunted by that look.

"How'd you set about it, then?" his voice lowering, lest the giant catch their meaning.

"Waal, in the fu'st place I'd set to work to count up jest 'bout what the job was wu'th—to me, boss, not to *you*, mind! Fer—ef the big critter is so minded, an' it's in yender hole ye stow away your jugs an' jimmy-johns an'—"

"We keep our stock in the cellar, of course."

What's your scheme? If it's only trying to work the bar for a drink, I'll make your heels break your fool's neck!" angrily snarled Ashley.

"Steady, pard!" warned Collins, whose keen eyes had been studying that whisky-bloated face. "He's straight goods. Let him make his offer, before you reject it!"

"Bliged to you, boss!" with a duck of his frowzy pate in that direction. "An' to you, boss," turning again to Ashley: "I don't mind savin' I'll take the job o' firin' the big critter, ef it's made wu'th the w'ar an' t'ar I'm more'n likely fer to come in fer, while doin' of it. That's my say—what's yours, boss?"

"What do you ask?"

"Waal, I don't want to play the hog, fer I never could grunt wu'th a cent! So—how'd a free bar an' onlimited play at the lunch counter hit ye, fer a starter, boss?"

"For how long a term?"

"Would—say a month, be too mighty much, boss?" hesitated Jerry Black, dubiously fingering his stubby chin the while.

"I'll give ye free run for two months, if you'll show how that big devil is to be gotten out o' that!"

"It's a whack, boss! Put her thar—an' the bargin's sealed fer two months!" delightedly chuckled the bummer, giving Ashley's hand a grip and pump-handle shake with a vigor that proved bad whisky had not greatly weakened his muscles.

"How are you going to make the rifle?" still



doubtingly asked the Mint Sport, shaking his hand free.

"Git a couple blankets an' kiver up that hole, fu'st thing," ordered Jerry Black, briskly, yet in tones too low for any one in the cellar to catch. "Then I want the door shet an' winders kivered, to make it as nigh plum' dark as ye kin git it. I'll do the rest, boss!"

When those shots came splintering through the floor, all save the two partners and Jerry Black left the saloon in greater haste than grace, but as all became quiet again, a few ventured back, while others flocked in front of the building as the news of a "high old circus" at the Mint began to spread through the town.

Only a chosen few were permitted to remain inside when the place was closed, and by the time this was done, Jerry Black had the hole covered with blankets, and a nearly empty beer-keg gathered up in his arms.

"All ready fer to make the flare, boss?" he whispered to Tom Ashley, who stood close at hand.

"All ready, whenever you are, Jerry," came the guarded reply.

#### CHAPTER XXVIII.

##### WHAT WAS FOUND IN THE CELLAR.

"THEN—hyar goes fer a grub-stake, or a hog-killin'!"

With those grim words, Jerry Black crept closer to the blanket-masked trap-door, and hurled the heavy keg downward at a sharp angle, the blankets going with the missile. And the next instant the reckless fellow jumped through the hole, at an opposite angle, striking the earthen floor heavily, but without receiving any injury.

Not Jerry Black alone, but all of those who had been left inside the room, fully anticipated a rapid fusilade from the Sky-scraper, at the first sign of an entrance to his retreat being attempted. It was to draw the worst of the fire in advance, that the keg was thrown into the cellar, and if Steve had made any arrangements for lighting up the darkness, the old-timer counted on the blankets which muffled the keg, to keep him deceived long enough for him to make his leap and get in a shot or two where it would do the most good.

But not a cry, not a sound other than that made by the keg itself, followed, even when Jerry Black made his leap into the unexplored darkness!

Tom Ashley played his part well, lighting a ball of oil-soaked waste, pitching it into the cellar, just as instructed by Jerry. And, as the bright flames shot upward, casting a brilliant glow, all above fairly held their breaths as they listened for the shots which were to forever quiet the big fellow from Siskiyou!

But those shots did not come!

Crouching down in one corner of the cellar, a cocked revolver in each hand, Jerry Black eagerly scanned the space before him, ready to prove that bad whisky had not yet undermined his nerve or lessened the skill in snap-shooting for which he had been famous when California was still an infant.

"You're not crippled, man?" at length cried Ashley, when nearly a minute—seemingly an age under such circumstances—had crept by since the fire-ball made its descent.

"No, but—durned ef I kin see ary thing wu'th shootin' at!" the old-timer replied. "Ef the critter hain't ahind some o' them bar'ls—Hyar's comin' fer ye, pardner!" with a reckless laugh, as he rose and leaped forward, pistols in advance.

Tom Ashley was standing where he could catch a glimpse of Jerry Black as he passed by the trap, and he instantly dropped to the floor of the cellar, to back the bumper up in his charge.

It proved to be valor spent in vain! The light was sufficiently bright for the two keen-eyed men to take in the whole extent of the cellar, and a cat could hardly have found concealment there, as they rapidly shifted their positions.

The only place where a man could possibly have hidden himself, was behind the few barrels of liquor ranked along one side of the cellar, and it took but a few seconds for them to search out every cranny in that quarter, without success!

Utterly amazed, Jerry and Tom stared at each other, unable even to utter an oath or ejaculation. Where was the big fellow? How could he have disappeared so completely?

"I say, down there!" cried out the stern tones of Dan Collins, his dark face making its appearance at the trap-door. "Has the big devil bolted you raw?"

"He's gone! He isn't in the cellar!" called back Ashley.

"Gone—how, where, and when?" demanded Collins.

Just then there came a heavy thumping at the front door, and that dark face was hastily withdrawn, to learn who was attempting to force an entrance.

"Stiddy, boss!" quickly warned Jerry Black, whose keen eyes were ranging in every direction. "Hain't that a hole in the wall, over yen?"

"Where? Show me—ha!" viciously exclaimed the Mint Sport, as his eyes caught sight of the suspicious cavity, and he was crouching for a leap, when Jerry Black arrested him, with:

"Wait! light up fu'st, boss!"

Catching up the nearly consumed fire-ball without thought for his fingers, Jerry hurled it straight at the dimly seen hole—if hole it was.

His aim was true enough, but the shock scattered the glowing stuff, extinguishing what little blaze remained, leaving the cellar in almost complete darkness.

"Go fetch 'nother light, boss!" hurriedly ordered the old-timer, barely loud enough for those keen ears to interpret aright. "I'll keep him kivered, an' ef he moves—I kin shoot pritty nigh as straight by ear as I kin by sight! Go—an' mighty lively, too!"

The Mint Sport waited for no more, but, springing under the trap, he leaped upward, catching by his hands, then swinging his lithe form up through the opening, almost without breaking the athletic motion.

He saw that Collins had opened the front door, and caught sight of the city marshal, and Don Carlos Salcedo, pale, but seemingly little the worse for the fall he had received, just crossing the threshold.

Others were behind them, among the number both Dave Terry and Joe Bisbing, but Ashley did not pause to note more.

"He must be down there, pard, if he went down at all!" Collins insisted, but Ashley did not linger to parley, simply saying:

"Black's on guard—we want a light. There's a hole of some sort, and— Out of the way, there!"

With a lamp taken from the chandelier, lighting it as he struck the cellar floor once more, the Mint Sport rejoined Jerry, neither of them paying any attention to those who swiftly entered the cellar, too eager to solve that seeming mystery, to await a report above.

"Kiver me, boss, an' ef the critter's in yender, we'll smoke him out in a holy hurry!" muttered Black, taking the lamp in his left hand, a revolver cocked in the other, then advancing upon the hole—for hole it surely was, dug in the cellar wall!

Fully expecting a fusilade from the cornered giant, the two men nevertheless boldly advanced, followed by Collins, Salcedo, the marshal and several others.

But no shots were fired, and the light showed them the end of the hole, where a mass of rock had checked the progress so laboriously made by the rightful claimants of the lost bonanza.

Jerry Black shifted the light a little to the right, where a brief recess had been dug, then stopped short with an ejaculation of almost awe. For the light was shining squarely upon a headless skeleton!

Tom Ashley also received quite a shock as he made the same discovery, and only pausing long enough to make sure Silver-tip Steve could by no possibility be hidden there, he backed out, making way for Collins and Salcedo.

Jerry Black still held the light, and that he had in a measure recovered from the shock he had received, was made clear by the broad grin that came into his face as he saw Carlos Salcedo recoil from that ghastly object, giving a low, inarticulate cry as he did so.

"Turns ye sorter yaller round the gills, don't it, pard?" he chuckled, giving the Californian a nudge with an elbow as that recoil came. "Waal, 'tain't so awful much fer purty, I don't think my own self, but 'tain't nigh so hefty fer danger as ef 'twas the big critter, anyway."

The Mint partners interchanged glances, in silence. They were both completely at a loss what to think.

Tom Ashley knew that, just so surely as he had broken through that trap, the Sky-scraper had not emerged again by any passage he knew of. Then—where had he gone?

Dan Collins, though rather skeptical for a few minutes, had become convinced to the same extent, and though the discovery of the skeleton had given him something of a start, he made another discovery which interested him vastly more.

The earth nearest that ghastly relic bore marks of pickax, and his practiced touch, backed by his keen eyes, made sure that some person had been very recently at work with that tool.

Who could it have been? Not Steve, or he would still be visible. Yet, if not he, who could it have been?

Taking the light, he examined the sides of the excavation with more care. He saw old marks; signs that at least a week must have passed by since the author of that hole had been at work, just there!

"There's more in this than we reckoned, pardner," he said, in grim tones, showing these unmistakable signs to his mate. "Some one's been digging here, and they couldn't have got in through the trap, so—hunt for another hole, gents!"

His excitement was contagious, and in less than another minute a score hands were sounding the earthen wall. Then came a cry of discovery, as that masked curtain gave back a hol-

low sound, and in the rush which followed, it was broken down—a shot rung out, followed by a cry of pain and a heavy fall!

#### CHAPTER XXIX.

##### THE SKY-SCRAPER QUESTIONS THE SKULL.

NASH BALDWIN looked at Steve with doubt and wonder mingled.

Was he more seriously hurt by that wound along the top of his skull, than he was willing to admit? Had the blow been severe enough to affect his brain? If not, why such a perplexing change in his manner, all of a sudden?

Had it been thus ever since that strange meeting in the cellar beneath the Mint? Had the consequent excitement prevented him from taking note of that alteration, until now?

It might be so. And yet—Nash Baldwin gave a brief shiver of aversion as his eyes fell upon the discolored skull in the hands of the veteran.

With wonderful quickness he recalled all that had followed his uncle's discovery of the ghastly relic, and with the rest came the startling thought:

"You surely recognize that skull, Uncle Steve! Who owned it in life?" he asked, with growing earnestness.

The Sky-scraper gave a start, flashing a look into the face of his nephew, then another around them, as though fearful lest other and unauthorized ears should be upon the alert.

"I didn't jest—ketch your words, lad," he muttered, his head once more lowering over the skull, his finger-nail scraping at the last discovered scar or cleft that marred the smoothness of the bones.

There was something in this husky voice, in that quick avoidance of his gaze, in the unusual manner throughout, that convinced Baldwin a secret of some sort was attached to that skull. Of what sort, or why it should affect the Sky-scraper so strongly, he could not even surmise.

His hand dropped gently on the old soldier's shoulder, and when he spoke again, there was an echo of love, trust and sympathy in his tones.

"I'm not trying to pry into your secrets, Uncle Steve—"

"Who said I had any secrets?" almost fiercely demanded Silver-tip Steve recoiling a step and turning so that Baldwin's hand dropped from his shoulder.

"Not I, uncle, unless you are perfectly willing to admit as much," returned Nash, with a forced laugh. "Only—when I saw you looking so closely at that skull—ugh!" with a shiver of disgust, his first feelings entirely altered now that he saw the relic in other hands. "Put it away, Uncle Steve, and let's think of something else. It gives me the shivers just to see you handle—I almost said fondle!"

That term would have been appropriate enough, too! for Steve gave the skull as careful treatment as he could have given the most beautiful and costly of ornaments!

"I wasn't skeered him in life, lad," muttered the veteran, one arm curling protectingly around the skull, while his other fingers passed lingeringly over the bones, much as one strokes the soft fur of a pet kitten. "Why should I flinch from him now he's dead?"

"In life?" echoed the young man, his former suspicions returning with redoubled force. "Then you *did* know the man who owned that skull in life, Uncle Steve? Who was it? Not—God above!" with an awful fear gripping his heart in that instant. "Not—not my—father?"

Silver-tip Steve gave a start almost as strong as that which betrayed how deeply Nash Baldwin was shocked by that possibility; but he quickly rallied, his eyes staring wildly into the face of his nephew for a brief space, before his lips formed a low, husky laugh.

"Your father, lad? My pardner? Is this—go 'way, boy!" laughing again, and far more naturally, flinging out his free hand, as it seemed, in contempt at such a preposterous idea.

Nash Baldwin inhaled a long breath of relief, only too willing to have his sudden fears dispelled. True, he had long since come to regard his father as dead, and he had entertained hopes of some day discovering his grave, to give his remains burial by the side of his wife, the young man's mother. But—not after this grimly horrible manner!

"I didn't know. You acted so queer, Uncle Steve! And then, you said you wasn't afraid of him *in life*, so what else could I think?"

"Did I say jest that, lad?" slowly spoke the Sky-scraper, his gaze once more bent upon the skull, his finger-nail still scraping away at that scar, if scar it was. "Didn't I say that the critter never lived as could git a ginewine skeer up on the old man? Didn't I say—by the Lord o' Israel! I knowed it from the fu'st!"

Dropping to his knees by the side of the fire, whipping out the knife Don Carlos had tried his level best to bury in that rapidly-beating heart, there on the landslide, Silver-tip Steve used its keen point to make sure his finger-nail had not deceived him.

Nash Baldwin also bent over the skull, his sudden repulsion briefly forgotten as he caught a portion of Hurst's excitement.

"Look!" came from those heavily-bearded



lips, as the Sky-scraper held the skull where the firelight fell fairly upon that cleft in the bone, where now could be seen the faint sparkle of metal. "Didn't I tell ye it meant murder? Didn't I say that *this* was the how he come by his death? Now—see fer yerself, lad!"

It was plain enough, now. A blade of some description had been driven into the skull, when it was a head, then broken off, either purposely or by accident.

"I see," muttered the young man, then drawing back, that feeling of repulsion returning with doubled force. "Murder, almost certainly! But, after all, what does it matter—to us, Uncle Steve?"

Those big eyes flashed a glance over a shoulder to the pale face of the speaker, but Steve did not reply, in words, just then.

"Of course, the poor fellow must have had friends, perhaps a family who lost track of him, just as we lost track of my father! But—"

The Sky-scraper rose abruptly, turning his back to the fire so that his own face was in shadow, yet all so naturally that Baldwin suspected naught of the truth.

"Long's they don't come no warnin' from eyther the Greaser nor the gal, I reckon thar's no harm in doin' a bit of talkin' twixt our own two lonesome selves, lad. So—whar did this skull come from?"

Baldwin, having rallied from the shock that preposterous fancy had given him, was looking into the darkness in hopes of seeing or hearing something of Felipa; but, as this query was put, he answered it as well as he was able.

The Sky-scraper listened in silence until the young man came to a pause, then spoke:

"The Greaser found it? He was diggin' fer what he calls the Del Cagatinta bonanza? An'—*this* yer' skull was right whar he 'lowed to ketch the treasure, eh?"

To all of which Nash Baldwin gave hasty confirmation, for his waiting ear caught sound of a light footfall even before his eyes could distinguish the trim, graceful figure of the maiden whom he was so rapidly learning to love with a love of a lifetime.

"She's coming—I'll see if there's any danger, Uncle Steve!" the young man added, springing past the fire.

A faint smile flickered into, then out of, the veteran's face as he looked after the lad, noting the manner in which he caught both of Felipa's hands between his own. The semi-darkness where that meeting took place, prevented his reading the emotions written in their faces, but he had seen enough to guess whither the tide was turning.

"Danger?" he muttered, through his beard. "More danger than's in *your* thoughts, my lad! Danger that you'd be only too glad to take to your bosom, hugging tighter the worse it hurt ye!"

As no warning cry came to him from the young couple, the man from Siskiyou moved back from the fire, bearing the skull with him. He moved almost like one in a dream, and only for the side-wall of rock which barred the way, it is hard to say whither or how far he might have wandered while in that half-dazed state.

Checked by the wall, Steve paused, then sat down, his long legs curled up under him, his hands resting in the lap thus formed, and on his hands, that skull!

His head bowed, his eyes turning toward the skull, though the darkness was too great for that grim object to be distinguished by other than the sense of touch.

His fingers were moving, their tips passing almost caressingly over the grisly emblem of mortality. Little by little, as of its own volition, the skull turned about, until the metal plate set into the bones, came in contact with one sensitive finger-tip.

The veteran gave a start, almost as though he had received an electrical shock. The half-stupor which had taken possession of him, body and brain, was broken, and as his wits began to work, so his tongue began to form words, barely loud enough to reach his own ears.

"Did I know him, in life? He asked me *that*! He—who ought to have been the very first to recognize—*Had he?*"

His muttered speech broke off abruptly, his head bent lower, his sensitive fingers pressed once more upon that metal plate.

Was he so sure, in his own mind? Was there only one person who had undergone the operation of trepanning for a badly fractured skull?

"Thar mought be a dozen—a hull rijiment the same way!" he muttered, trying to answer his own questions, yet knowing, all the time, he was like the schoolboy who tried to keep up his courage while passing the graveyard after dark, by whistling! "Dead men was plenty in them days, an' they giner'ly died with thar' boots on. So—why moughtn't this yer' be one o' them?"

His hands raised, the skull came closer to his eyes. He could almost trace the outlines of that metal plate, sight of which had roused such strange fancies in his brain. For, of course, they *must* be fancies!

"Yet—ef 'twas true—ef he knowed who *you* was in life, old pard, would the lad shiver an' draw back like he did a bit ago? Would he feel as though he'd lost more'n he found? Would

it send a pain through his heart, like it does through mine?"

"Ef it's truth—ef thar's what I e'ena'most know is onto this yer' bit o' metal—the findin' out'd hit him hard, fer he's a good lad; good as they make 'em, pardner! He'd hev wet eyes, an' his sleep'd be broken fer a time, I reckon. But—would he feel it as hard as I'm feelin' of it now, pard?"

The skull came closer to his face. His head bent lower, until his cheek touched that grim relic of mortality. Then—his head turned until an ear pressed against the skull.

Stephen Hurst was listening for an answer to his questions!

Once more the skull lay in his lap, and once again his fingers were moving back and forth across that plate.

There lay the solution, and Silver-tip Steve knew it only too well.

He knew that, were this the skull he feared, all doubts might be settled by simply removing that plate from its setting, and giving the reverse side a careful examination.

"I've got to do it—but, I'm skeered!" he muttered, huskily.

Still fondling the skull, Stephen Hurst recalled the account given by Nash Baldwin of its discovery.

Found at the very spot where Manuel Diaz expected to bring a great treasure to light! And—Theodore Baldwin had made his "rich find" in this neighborhood! His find, too, must have been something closely akin to a buried treasure! Then—

"Who done it, pard?" muttered the Silver-tip, lifting the skull before his face with both hands. "Who driv' that knife into your head, an' left it broken off, fer me ter find, after all these years? Who murdered ye? Was it fer the gold you'd found? Who did it? Whar is he, pard? How be I to find the devil?"

As these half-crazed questions passed his lips, Steve gave the skull a shake, like one who hopes to hasten an answer. And, as he did so, there came a faint rattling sound from the skull, as if some small object lay loose in the cavity where once had been a living brain.

But before Hurst could investigate, the spring-gun had exploded.

### CHAPTER XXX.

#### SEARCHING FOR HUMAN MOLES.

WHEN the fall of Manuel Diaz's ingenious curtain came, to unmask the laboriously constructed tunnel, bringing with it a shot and a cry of pain, all save the unlucky fellow who had caught the bullet, shrunk away to either side of the hole, drawing weapons in readiness to repel a possible attack.

"Help! don't let 'em butcher—help!" "It's Dave Terry, by glory!" howled fat Joe Bisbing, as the lamplight fell across that writhing form, now lying alone in front of the tunnel.

"Help! I'm all—shot to—pieces!" half-howled, half-groaned the wounded wretch, vainly striving to drag himself to one side, where he would be out of range of the tunnel defenders.

"Steady, with the light, there!" sharply cried Tom Ashley, sending shot after shot into the dark opening as he sprang forward, and with one hand gripping an arm of the injured ruffian, dragging him across the cellar.

There was no answering fire to his shots. Only that one explosion had occurred, and not a cry, not a sound came from the tunnel, to show that the giant and his possible companions were standing on guard.

"Look to your pard, Bisbing!" harshly added the Mint Sport, swiftly throwing the empty shells out of his weapons and replacing them with cartridges. "Back him up, Collins!"

Ashley had caught sight of the red flash as the curtain fell, and knowing that whoever fired the shot must have been close at hand, he hoped to end the matter without further delay, and darted straight into the dark hole, knife in hand.

Only to strike his head with stunning force against the point of a rock which hung from the low roof of the tunnel, knocking him back close into the arms of his partner, who had followed upon his heels.

"Make room, curse ye!" snarled Collins, staggering back under that burden, once more in the cellar. "Keep the hole covered, and shoot at sight! Hold that light so I can see what—"

"I'm all right!" gasped Ashley, rallying with an effort. "Who hit me? Don't let him get away, but—*save him for me!*"

The blow had been a severe one, but his hat had in a measure protected his skull, and nothing worse than a headache was likely to follow. Yet, even when half-insensible, the bulldog grit of the Mint Sport held good!

Nothing like a charge followed this temporary defeat, and Jerry Black, living up to the reputation he had earned in other days, ventured close enough to the opening to make a discovery which put a different face on matters.

"They hain't nary a critter on guard, an' thar's the proof!" he cried, snatching the light and holding it where the partners could make out the "spring-trap" devised by Manuel Diaz, so that his mask for the tunnel could not be

seriously disturbed without sounding an alarm to himself and his young mistress. "Jest a gun rigged up fer to 'splode when a body 'sturbed this riggin'!"

"Back! no crowding here!" harshly commanded Ashley, rallying once more. "Bring lights—the lantern, for one, pardner! This means more mischief than we counted on, by long odds!"

A scheme to raid the Mint, by glory!" ejaculated Collins, then making all haste to procure the necessary lights by aid of which that dark passage might be thoroughly explored.

All was excitement in the cellar and above, in the saloon, when this new discovery became generally understood. It seemed the general opinion that a daring attempt had been made to raid the Mint, only for this premature discovery of the daring plot, and there was no lack of volunteers to run to earth the baffled criminals. Indeed, the main difficulty lay in keeping their force within reasonable bounds.

No one seemed to have thoughts for Dave Terry, who was groaning with the agony of a badly shattered knee, save fat Joe Bisbing. And it may be doubted whether his aid and sympathy came from a higher motive than a desire to stay out of the game where such costly stakes were demanded!

When lights were brought, Jerry Black volunteered to carry the lantern, casting its bright rays in advance, only asking that the Mint partners come next, to cover his movements with their revolvers.

"Tain't that I'm so mighty anxious fer to ketch *all* the lead, ye mind, gents," the reckless veteran said, with a grin. "But it's 'way-up stakes I'm playin' fer, an' I never was a hog; I want to earn what I'm gwine fer to git as wages, ye mind!"

"Go on! It'll be full swing in the Mint until you cry enough of your own accord, Jerry!" said Ashley, swiftly.

"I'd light up the devil fer them wages, boss!" chuckled Black, entering the tunnel and making rapid progress.

This was easy enough, since the secret toilers had only made their passage large enough for convenient operation, to lessen the work. It required no pause on the part of the veteran to turn his lantern from side to side to show all the space; while in the tunnel, it was an impossibility for an enemy to lie hidden, save in front.

But the situation changed when Jerry Black emerged from the tunnel, into the cavern proper.

One and all of the party gave vent to startled cries, or else stared about in silent amazement. Not one of them all had ever heard of such an extensive cave being so near Hard Cash, and while the proof was spread before them, it was none the less difficult of belief.

"Steady, lads!" warned Tom Ashley, pistols ready as he cast his keen glance around. "This is a different lay-out from that hole, and if we make a mistake in marking the cue-card at the start, we're coming out loser—sure!"

"That's what, pard!" grimly said Collins, taking possession of one of the lights. "You make sure of this end, Tom, and I'll mosey on to find the other end, if there is any. If I yelp, close in, will you?"

"Bet I will! Take Jerry Black with you, pard. You'll need the lantern for the double-quick."

"All right. You can do with the lamps. Catch, if you can, without too much risk, but if you have to burn powder—*shoot straight!*"

"Straight as a string, Dan, and don't you forget it!"

With a fair force to back him up, Dan Collins pressed ahead, having already seen that this unsuspected cavern was long and comparatively narrow, seemingly running directly through the hill at the foot of which the Mint had been built.

He had already reasoned that, in all probability, Silver-tip Steve and his comrades, if such he had, had probably pressed on to escape by the other entrance, since it could hardly be expected that the masked tunnel could escape notice when he was not found in the cellar.

He might have lingered within sound until the explosion of the spring-gun, but that sound, denoting discovery, would surely put him to flight.

Hence it was that Collins pressed ahead at speed too great to take note of various items which a more deliberate advance could hardly have overlooked, his main idea being to reach the further extremity of the cave as quickly as possible, there to pick up the trail of the big fellow, or to hold it against his exit, should they be lucky enough to cut off his flight through over-confidence on his part, or any unforeseen accident happening him.

On the contrary, Ashley searched the retreat thoroughly as he advanced, casting the light into every practicable hiding-place before passing it by, in only one instance finding aught to baffle him; a deep but narrow crack in the rock floor, to the bottom of which, in spots even his brightest lamp failed to cast its rays.

Leaving this for more careful examination in case their game was not sprung elsewhere, the



Mint Sport kept on, until he noted—what Collins had passed by unseen—a blackened spot on the rocks where a fire had been built. And he gave a little cry of grim meaning as he jerked back his hand, finger-tips scorched by the still hot rock.

"The nest's warm—too infernally warm!" he added, with a harsh laugh, before sucking his fingers. "It'll pay to study the game a bit longer, right at this stage, pardners!"

As the cavern at this point widened out considerably, Ashley bade his men scatter and search both sides closely, making a signal in case any discovery worth reporting should be made. And, bearing a lamp with tin reflector attached, thus casting the glow in advance while in a goodly measure leaving his figure in the shade, the Mint Sport fell to work on his own hook.

Taking the side on which that crevice had been noted for some little distance, Ashley was very soon at the brink, finding the chasm considerably wider and, apparently, deeper than at any other point which he had examined.

Seeing nothing of interest in the abyss itself, he turned its light across, passing it slowly along the rugged, broken rocks, which formed that side of the cavern. Then, with a low ejaculation, and flinging up his right hand, he pulled trigger!

## CHAPTER XXXI.

## SAVED BY THE DEAD.

AS the veteran Steve was inclined to suspect, Nash Baldwin would gladly have turned that into a sentimental meeting, but Felipa, though she briefly yielded her hands to his warm grasp, gave him little encouragement, beyond that simple submission.

"'Twas Tio Manuel begged me to return and warn you, Senor Nash, and our good friend, yonder, to hold themselves in readiness for flight," she hastily explained, freeing her hands and drawing away.

"He thinks there is danger, then?"

"The enemy are in the cellar, senor, cursing and raging because they find nothing of thy relative."

"There would be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth among their absent relatives, if they had found him!" laughed the young man, though he could not wholly ignore the danger.

If the Sky-scraper had been followed into the cellar so soon, in the face of the fact that he had given unmistakable proof that he had escaped without injury from his unexpected drop, and that his weapons were in good working order, then the gang were in deadly earnest.

That point granted, the rest could hardly help following—not finding the Sky-scraper in the cellar, his manner of leaving it would, sooner or later, surely be discovered. Then—chase, swift and deadly!

Felipa was ill at ease, and Nash did his level best to cheer her up, though his success was hardly flattering.

"'Tis not that!" with a swift flirt of a hand as he spoke of the danger, the better to assure her how surely he would shield her from harm. "But—all hope of keeping our oath is gone! I will fail of the sacred duty left me by my sainted mother! Now—all is lost!"

"Not if you will trust me—not if you will trust Uncle Steve and me, Felipa! Give us the right to act for you, and we'll secure all your rights, even though we have to enlist an army of men to fight for them!"

A warm heart seldom finds a lack of words, and above all other things, Nash Baldwin wished to stand well in those eyes. And so, paying little heed to the passage of time, giving the man with the skull hardly a passing thought, he was pressing his wooing in the only manner left open for him just then, when Manuel Diaz came into sight, moving rapidly, his withered visage showing that the crisis must be close at hand.

"The ladrones are coming, Manuel?"

"Not yet, my *nina*! There is still a ray of hope, though so feeble my old eyes can scarcely divide it from utter darkness."

"Then—"

"I waited at the spring-trap, senorita, listening with both my old ears. I heard them cry out as they found what was left of the skeleton—may Satan cause them one and all to become the same, right speedily!"

"Then they'll not be much longer in smelling out the other end of your tunnel, friend Diaz!" grimly nodded Baldwin, looking to his weapons in that semi-darkness.

"I fear you are only too near right, senor," bowed the old man, casting a quick glance past the fading fire. "Your friend, senor? I do not see him. Surely he has not wandered away in the darkness? There is death lurking on every side to entrap the heedless foot, and—"

"He is yonder, I think, Manuel," said Felipa, pointing in the right direction. "I watched him go, but a few moments since. I will find him if you wish."

"If he is safe, and nigh at hand, senorita, let him rest in peace. Old as I am, I can easily do the work that needs to be done before we leave this spot to gain another of greater safety."

"Then—it is not open flight, Manuel?"

There was a trace of doubt in Felipa's voice, and the old man came to her side, his hand pressing hers, his eyes lending both courage and assurance of safety.

"Thy sacred vow shall be kept, *nina*! 'Tis but one more brief check, and just as we surmounted other obstacles, just so will we conquer this! I say it—I, Manuel Diaz, the servant of thy honored parents, the slave of their worthy daughter!"

Pressing his thin lips to her hands, Manuel Diaz dropped them, turning and falling to work with a rapidity which showed Nash Baldwin that just such a happening as seemed inevitable now, had long been anticipated and arranged for.

The fire was quickly disposed of. The coals and brands were swept upon a sheet of tin, then carried to the chasm and cast into its depths. The blankets were hastily rolled into bundles, and the few articles of food were secured in like manner.

Felipa lent her aid in doing this, but Baldwin was of little service, thanks to his ignorance of his surroundings, and of the plans his recently-found friends had formed.

"At least I can play pack-horse!" he laughed, more to cover the natural chagrin born of his helplessness than because their present situation looked at all mirthful. "If you can point out the direction I'm to take, Manuel, I'll be moving a portion—"

"For thy life, senor, stir not out of the light!" cried Felipa, her face looking almost ghastly pale as it turned toward him.

The cause of this swift warning was made sufficiently clear, a few moments later, when the rays of the lantern revealed something of that grim crevice, curving around, following the shape of the cavern as a rule, the rock floor being comparatively smooth and level on the one side, while on the other rose a broken, jagged, cracked and seemingly impracticable wall.

Manuel Diaz, guided by the lantern in the hands of his young mistress, knelt on the very verge of this long pit, leaning so far over and so low, as he felt with outstretched fingers into the darkness, that Nash Baldwin could hardly keep from fastening a friendly grasp upon the old man's ankles to save him from deliberate suicide!

"He knows—and it must be so!" murmured Felipa, reading his half-formed fears. There is no other way for us to escape, senor!"

"I have it, *nina*!" grunted Diaz, drawing back, a strong yet pliable wire in his skinny fingers. "'Tis the wise man who prepares for danger in peaceful hours, senor, and this—"

At that moment the heavy report of the spring-gun came rumbling through the cavern, and knowing that only swift work could save them now, Manuel Diaz altered his sentence to:

"Bring the other American, *nina*! Take the light—I require it not, as thou knowest! Go—and hasten back, my *nina*!"

"Not alone, Felipa!" and Nash caught her free hand as the maiden turned to obey those hurried commands, issued though they were by a servant.

They found Silver-tip Steve, on his feet, that skull crowded into the bosom of his flannel shirt, for safety. There was a dazed look in his eyes, at first, like that a man wears when suddenly roused from a bewildering dream; but as Nash spoke, the giant brushed a hand rapidly across his eyes, and the mist seemed to vanish.

"Brace up, uncle! You heard those rascals knock at the door?" his nephew said, half in jest, half in doubt as to his relative's perfect sanity as he recalled that glancing shot along his skull. "They'll be coming in, whether or no, and without your strong arms to form a barrier, we'd be in a pretty tight box!"

"There is no time for talk—hasten, senores!" urged Felipa, moving back toward the spot where Manuel Diaz had been left at work.

Where had been an impassable chasm, now was a plank bridge, the seeming miracle having been wrought after some fashion by that wire: but there was no time to investigate further, just then. The enemy might be upon them at any moment, when the hardest fighting they might do, could avail them but little in the face of long odds.

Even in the utter darkness Manuel Diaz had carried one load across the chasm on that single narrow plank, and he was returning when Felipa came back with the lantern.

"If your brain be not perfectly steady, senor, take my hand and follow, with closed eyes," hurriedly said Felipa, to Nash.

Instead of accepting the proffered member, gladly though he would have given it "holy palmer's kiss" under any other circumstances, the young man caught up a package and swiftly passed over the dipping bridge, stepping from wood to stone on the further side of the chasm.

"You fu'st, both o' ye," grimly laughed Silver-tip Steve as their eyes turned in that direction. "Ef it breaks with my heft, no need o' losin' three whar one's heap sight a-plenty!"

There was no time to lose in argument for politeness' sake and the two Californians were quickly over the chasm. And Silver-tip Steve

followed after, the tough plank bending greatly beneath his weight, yet luckily holding firm.

"Show them the way to our refuge, *nina*!" whispered Manuel Diaz, at the same instant drawing that end of the plank toward him, letting it sink at the other as it lost its rock-support.

With the rapidity and ease of one who knows just what he is about, the old man lowered the plank into the abyss by means of another wire attached to that end, thus hiding the narrow bridge from all but the closest and most persistent search.

While he was thus engaged, Felipa, bearing the lantern, guided her guests through a narrow passage formed by two abrupt curves, so shaped as to be hardly visible even to an eye directed exactly upon the outer one. Hidden from the cavern by this formation, Felipa guided them up a series of irregular steps, plainly the work of nature alone, finally pausing when almost at the shelving roof.

It was a strange creation, and one not easily described so as to give a perfect idea of the place. Even while glancing around them, with the rays of the lantern to reveal the different features, her guests were slow to comprehend just the nature of the refuge into which the maiden had guided them.

The stone roof was arching above their heads, curving downward in the direction of the cavern, falling below the level on which they now stood, blending with the ragged rocks beyond and below, until one looking from the spot where the fire had been kindled in the main cave, would never dream of still further openings beyond that rough wall.

Manuel Diaz came up while the two men were trying to fully make out this optical illusion, and by his advice the lantern was turned lower, until barely a spark of light remained.

"The ladrones are coming, *nina*!" he said, in guarded whispers. "I caught the glow of their lights, and so knew the worst! Now—wait!"

The party led by Dan Collins dashed rapidly by, and by the dim reflection cast over the rocks by their lantern, a better idea of the formation of that refuge was gained by Steve. As for Baldwin, he was finding more comfort in holding the trembling hands of the fair Californian, than such dry investigation could have given him.

The prospect of fighting seemed to scatter the mists which that as yet unnamed skull had caused to gather over the brain of the giant, and after making sure the skull was safe in his bosom—first carefully wrapped up in a silk handkerchief—he silently crept over the rocks, seeking for a point from whence he might win a fair sight of their foemen.

He was thinking of Salcedo when he made this move, and as his eyes caught sight of other lights coming nearer, the man from Siskiyou dropped a hand to his revolver, with a return to his former deadly hatred.

For the moment he forgot that the Californian had not caused the death of his lad. Just then he only remembered that he had set forth from the land-slide with the express purpose of killing Carlos Salcedo.

Silver-tip Steve was crouching close to a rising ledge of rock, leaning partly over its top, when Tom Ashley cast the light of his lamp across the chasm and upon that ragged wall of splintered rock.

The rays reflected from the Sky-scraper's eyes, and, swift as thought that bullet was sped; to give Stephen Hurst a dull shock over the heart.

Steve ducked swiftly behind the rock, one hand clapped over his bosom. And the faint rattle of bones told him his life had almost surely been saved by the dead!

## CHAPTER XXXII.

## WHAT JERRY BLACK WHISPERED.

THE instant he pulled trigger at what he fancied was a human face outlined against a rock, beyond that chasm, Tom Ashley sprung swiftly to one side, placing the lamp on the rock floor and casting himself into shadow, fully expecting a return shot in case his own aim had not proved deadly.

With excited cries his party came in that direction, but all sounds came from his side of that seemingly bottomless abyss.

Ashley showed no haste in accounting for his shot, and it was not until several of his force had fully exposed themselves in the lamplight—affording admirable targets for the enemy, in case his eyesight had not failed him, and his hasty aim had—that the Mint Sport offered any explanation of his shot.

Even then he was very chary of his words, until after thoroughly examining those rocks beyond the chasm, by means of his reflector.

Unfortunately for his own peace of mind, Ashley had fired at what he rightly conceived must be a pair of human eyes, reflecting the light of the lamp he carried, on sight, without having time to take note of their exact position, or being able to recall any peculiarity in its surroundings, now that he slowly swept the bright rays over those rocks.

Thus it chanced that he centered his gaze on a little blot marking a portion of the rock several feet from where those glittering eyes had ac-



tually been seen; a spot that looked like the bluish mark made by a swiftly-driven bullet.

At that point there was no chance for a human body to lie hidden in death, nor to have crouched in life. So, though fiercely reluctant to own himself mistaken, Ashley had to swallow the bitter pill.

"I thought I did when I didn't, and that settles it!" he growled, answering all questions as one.

Just at that instant a huge bat came swooping close to the lamp, causing more than one of those hardy fellows to duck and dodge in the strange, shivering mixture of awe and disgust which the majority of mankind seem to feel for the ill-omened creatures.

Ashley ducked with his followers, but at the same time a breath of relief came away. His hasty shot had disturbed the bat, and, in all probability, it was its bright eyes he had caught a glimpse of, reflecting the light.

True, this left him at a loss where to place the Man from Siskiyou, but it explained how he could have missed the bigness of a man at such short range, even with a snap-shot.

"Nothing less than an infernal bat *could* find lodgment over yonder!" he muttered to himself, yet slowly sweeping his light over the wall, cracked and creased in a thousand places, as though the weight of the rising hills above had proven too much for its powers of resistance.

He was still engaged in scanning the irregular wall, when Dan Collins came hurrying back, drawn by that pistol-shot, leaving his party to guard the other end of the long cavern, which he had just reached when those multiplied echoes came rumbling through the bowels of the perforated hill.

"What's the word, pard?" he sent in advance, following with pistol drawn and more than ready for use.

"A wasted cartridge—nothing better, I reckon, Dan," came the reluctant admission. "And your end of the game, pardner?"

"We've found the hole, but that's all, as yet."

"You blocked it, of course!"

"Not much! Left it open!" then, adding in lower tones, like one who is giving no chances away to opponents, "but if any duck tries to use it, without first giving the password, he'll cash in, right there!"

The partners completed their examination of the rock wall on the other side of the chasm, tracing it for a goodly number of rods, both back and in advance, at the same time looking for some possible method of crossing that barrier.

In both they were disappointed, for neither crossing nor sign of the fugitive rewarded their persistent search. And when the crevice finally ran out, it did so close to a perpendicular wall, where even a rat could not have found a foothold.

"It's a mighty sight of daylight burned, but we've got one thing to show for it: our game didn't take to that side of the crack, anyway!"

Tom Ashley was perfectly sincere in making this statement. After such a thorough examination, it seemed worse than folly to decide any differently.

"It's long odds the big devil made a straight rush for daylight and fresh air," grimly spoke up Collins, as the little party moved along, the partners in advance, sweeping their lights from side to side in quest of a possible hiding-place.

"And we're crawling along like snails!" viciously muttered Ashley.

"One thing at a time, cully! If we didn't feel our way carefully now, maybe we'd have to begin again and do it all over! So—sweep good, and if we can't be happy, we'll be as happy as we can—see?"

This was rather reversing the natural order of things, for Ashley ordinarily did the optimistic for that firm. But trifles often tip the mental scale, and while Ashley had rather marred his record by wasting a bullet on a bat in place of a man, Collins had carried out his part of the contract with the smoothness of silk.

It was mainly owing to the latter that their advance was so slow, for he was resolved to leave naught to chance which could just as well be made certain, and not a possible hiding-place was passed by without receiving a thorough investigation.

"We'll need to rob an owl's nest for eyes, pard, if you keep along at this gait!" impatiently growled the blonde member of the firm.

"You reckon it'll be dark before we get to the other end of the hole, Tom?"

"Dead sure to be, if you don't mog along at a livelier gait!"

"Haven't looked at your ticker lately, have ye?" chuckled Collins, laughing outright, as Ashley gave an ejaculation of amazement, after a hasty glance at his watch.

"Nearly nine o'clock!" the Mint Sport ejaculated, in amazement. "Where has the time gone to?"

"Up the flume, pardner! It was good and dusky when I heard your shot, so I reckon it's plenty dark outside by now. Well, all the more reason why we want to sweep clean as we go along. See?"

But even the most persistent of searchers must fail to find as long as they look where the object wanted is not; and when, at length, the cave entrance was reached by the second party, so far from being jolly and feeling like laughing over his partner, Collins was grimly silent, sourly sullen, a human hedgehog for the time being.

The lights revealed sundry footprints, both turned toward and from the cavern, but after a short distance the trail spread out and scattered over a space of ground too rocky for trailing by artificial light.

Still, the partners would not entirely abandon the game. They set a guard over the cave entrance, to watch through the rest of the night, then started over the hill to reach Hard Cash.

While they were making these arrangements, however, an incident took place which, if only because of after events, should find record.

Among those who waited in comparative idleness while that search for the trail by lamplight was going on, was Don Carlos Salcedo, and Jerry Black, the "old-timer."

Possibly the last named felt that he had done quite enough to make his next two months—an age, looked at through his spectacles!—a prolonged feast of food and drink, without any further thought on his part. Then, too, he had still another glorious possibility in his mind's eye, and watching his opportunity, when Don Carlos moved out of range of the others guarding the mouth of the cave, honest Jerry lost little time in putting fortune to the touch.

"I say, boss!" he spoke, in his mildest tones, at the same time venturing to gently tug the Californian by an arm.

"Well, why do you not say it, then?" sourly growled Don Carlos, his black brows meeting in a sullen scowl.

"Kinder dug-gun sort o' funny thing we discovered back ther in the cut-off hole onder the Mint—don't ye reckon, boss?"

"I don't comprehend!"

"Which is my fault, 'long o' the tongue o' me swingin' out o' gear fer lack o' proper oilin', ye see, boss," bowed Jerry; then grinning squarely into that dark, bruised face as he added: "How d'you reckon that stack o' bones come right in that p'tick'lar spot, boss?"

"How should I know? What do you mean, anyway?" snapped Salcedo.

"Waal, ef I must spit it out, boss, reckon I must! I've ained a good two months grub an' drink, a'ready, this night, but I didn't think to ax for dingbats to chuck at the tiger, 'tween spells. Mebbe you'll give me a odd han'ful or so, boss?"

"Why should I, you rascal?"

"Waal," with a swift movement drawing near enough to let his next words fall into those ears alone. "Waal, what's the matter with payin' me wages *not* to tell the hull gang jest how an' when that stack o' bones come to be whar we found it, boss?"

#### CHAPTER XXXIII.

##### HOW STEVE BROKE THE NEWS.

SCARCELY had Silver-tip realized how his life had almost certainly been preserved by the skull which he carried in the bosom of his shirt, than a sharp grip was fastened upon his arm, a keen point was thrust fairly against the back of his neck, and the low, hissing whisper of Manuel Diaz's voice came to his ears:

"Silence! give no sign, for *her* dear life! Even though the lead of yonder devil be biting thy heart, close thy teeth and die as a true man ought, or—lift thy voice even in a groan, and thou diest!"

With excited cries the search-party was gathering at the spot where Tom Ashley crouched after firing that hasty shot, and under cover of this tumult, there was both time and opportunity for an interchange of words.

Hurst endeavored to explain just what had happened, and was about to volunteer to hold the entire gang at bay, when Manuel Diaz cut him short. Now that he knew the big fellow was not seriously injured, he imperiously commanded silence, and an immediate return to the younger couple.

"It was the action of a madman, senorita," he said, with grim resignation in face and voice. "Tis pity that wise people should be called upon to help pay the penalty, but such it is written. Come!"

The lantern was turned a trifle higher, causing it to give a little more light, without endangering the fugitives by showing a glow sufficient to guide the enemy. Bearing this, Manuel Diaz led the way over a confused tangle of bare rocks, at times passing where no one would suspect that a clear trail lay just beyond.

Yet, difficult though the journeying was, and slowly though the party was forced to travel, owing to the ignorance of their two guests, a very few minutes after that snap-shot by the Mint Sport, they seemed to have reached the end.

A perpendicular rock barred the way in front, and on each side was a formation equally impassable. Hurst and Baldwin interchanged quick glances as they came to this obtuse angle, where they were penned in on all sides save one; and there the enemy held power!

"Should those ladrones track us to this spot,

senores, what would you do?" dryly asked Manuel Diaz, holding up his lantern and casting its subdued glow first upon one face, then upon the other.

"Make it mighty interesting to the critters while it lasted, anyway!" laughed the herculean adventurer, now seemingly his old-time self, improving the opportunity to look at his weapons.

"Fight to the last, of course," quietly said Baldwin, then turning to Felipa, he added in a different tone of voice: "They shall never lay the weight of a finger on you, senorita, while a spark of life is left in me!"

Even that dim light was enough to betray a rising blush, and without risking a reply in words, Felipa caught hold of a hidden wire, colored to match the rock the better to escape notice where it was forced to pass in sight. At a brisk pull, a ladder of raw-hide came rolling down the perpendicular face of the wall, greatly to the surprise of uncle and nephew.

"Up, Tio Manuel!" nodded Felipa, with an anxious glance toward the main cavern. "The senores will need your hand to show them where to step. I will follow. No words, but action!"

Active as a cat, the little Californian mounted the ladder, and as he shook it in notice that all was ready for another, Felipa bowed to the Sky-scraper, who ascended without a word.

Baldwin would have insisted on filling the post of honor, but the maiden would not listen.

"Go, I bid thee, Senor Nash. I must remain to conceal the wire, the secret of which thou knowest not. Go—unless thou wouldst have the ladrones drive us from this, our last refuge!"

Five minutes later the little party were gathered safely in a low but comfortable recess among the rocks, where it seemed impossible for the Mint gang to find them, without calling bloodhounds to their assistance.

Then, too, as minute after minute rolled by without bringing sight or sound of the enemy, the belief expressed by Steve that Tom Ashley had fired that shot without being fairly certain his mark was a human one, became that of the others.

As yet, Stephen Hurst had not found time to examine how the skull to which he in all probability owed his life, had fared. He knew, through the sense of touch, that the bullet had wrought some damage, for there were splinters of bone to be distinguished, though held together by the stout silk kerchief.

Now that the danger was averted, if not entirely eluded, he fell apart from the others, pleading sleepiness as a plausible excuse.

"I'll be so nigh a word 'll roust me up, lad," he assured his nephew, before moving away.

No objections were raised. Nash asked nothing better than to be left alone with Felipa, and as Manuel Diaz, growing convinced that the alarm last received was a false one, was already beginning to talk about taking a scout on the mountain, to learn just what plans the Mint gang might be shaping, he fancied he saw that agreeable prospect growing brighter by degrees.

Steve had no intention of sleeping, despite the excuse he gave for creeping away into a corner by himself. And, no sooner was he alone, than he took that grim relic from his bosom, untying the handkerchief and spreading it carefully over his lap, to guard against the possible loss of even a splinter of bone.

His fears had been well founded. That bullet had worked no little damage, and, even as the veteran felt for the metal plate, it came away in his hand!

How long he sat motionless, holding that tell-tale plate in his hand, raised as though for his eyes to read the letters engraved on its inner side, Stephen Hurst never knew. Nor did he know what broke the spell.

Once broken, all indecision vanished. He knotted the kerchief once more about the bones, securing the bundle on his bosom as before. He fell to polishing the silver plate upon a knee, never giving over until fully convinced that the light of a single match would forever set those sad doubts at rest.

Not until the match ceased its splutterings, not until its flame rose clear and steady, did Stephen Hurst bring eyes and plate into connection. Then—the light went out, but he knew the worst!

The fate of the long missing miner was solved, for engraved on that bit of silver he had read the two letters, "T. B."

Meanwhile Manuel Diaz had left the refuge for the outer world, and by cautious and skillful scouting, he had been able to glean some important information concerning the enemy.

Himself unseen, unsuspected, he had counted the force detailed by Dan Collins and Tom Ashley to guard the cave entrance through the remainder of the night. He had crawled close enough to catch a portion of the interview sought by Jerry Black with Don Carlos Salcedo, and though he had been unable to hear sufficient to fully understand the bond which connected the oddly assorted couple, he learned enough to mark Jerry Black for future reference.



He was near enough to where the Sky-scraper had retreated, to catch a glimpse of that flickering match, and this led him to pause first where the old soldier was crouching. He gave a start as his hand touched that shoulder, for Hurst was shivering like one with the ague.

"You are ill, señor?" asked Diaz; but there came no reply, and now thoroughly frightened, the old man hastened to where the young couple were seated, side by side, near the dimly burning lantern.

Baldwin took the alarm almost at the first word, and catching up the lantern, he hastened over to where his uncle was crouching, that silver plate held before his blankly staring eyes.

"What's the matter, Uncle Steve?" cried Nash, frightened by that ashen face, those vacant eyes, that violent shivering. "You're sick! I ought to have—"

An abrupt change came over the veteran. That shivering was no longer perceptible. His eyes regained their usual appearance, and if his face remained pale, that alone betrayed aught of the mental torture he had been enduring ever since reading the inscription on that plate, taken from the skull against which his heart was now beating.

"No, lad, I'm not sick," he said, in even tones, smiling faintly as their eyes met. "I've just been thinking a bit, and—I'd like to have a little talk with you, Nash, if you can spare the time, just as well as not."

"Of course I can spare it, but, you surely are sick, uncle?"

"Not in body, lad, though I may be at heart. I've been thinking over the old days, Nash, when your father and I were in the army together. You haven't forgotten what I told you, last night, on the hill, before we saw that light among the ruins?"

Felipa touched Diaz on an arm, and they quietly withdrew.

"Let them go, for now, lad," urged Hurst as Baldwin seemed on the point of recalling them, since friends so bound together by common interests could have no secrets from each other. "You can tell them all about it, if you see fit. But now—Nash, how much can you remember about your father?"

"Very little, uncle, if indeed I can remember anything more than my mother told me. You know I was but a baby when he went away?"

"Only a baby—that's so!" with a long breath which was almost a sigh. "Then—it isn't as though you had known him as well as your mother taught you to love him, Nash?"

The young man hesitated. It was difficult to say, but none the less true: that father was now, as he had ever been, but little more than a vague, shadowy possibility. His memory was cherished, just as one cherishes the memory of a far-away kinsman or remote ancestor.

"I know, Nash," said Hurst, after a pause. "It's duty-love, not such love as one feels for another where their daily lives have bound their hearts together. Don't bother, lad; I'm not blaming you. It couldn't well be different, seeing how matters went."

"I'd give my right hand to find father, Uncle Steve!"

"And I'd give my head—to find him alive, Nash! But, that isn't likely to ever happen, as reason must tell ye, lad! If he'd lived, be sure he'd never have left his wife and baby boy for all these years. So—did your mother ever tell you how badly your father was hurt, in the Mexican War, Nash?"

"She told me—yes."

"Did she say that the surgeon had to remove a portion of his skull, where it was so badly broken?"

"Uncle Steve, you mean something—what?"

The hand that clasped Steve's wrist trembled perceptibly, and the young man's face showed very pale by the dim light.

"I was there when they performed the operation, Nash," slowly added Hurst, without answering that question, directly. "I was the one that told your father what had to be done. And—Nash?"

"Go on, man! Can't you see you are torturing me?"

"Your father—not then, but fated to be—laughed when I showed so much caution in breaking the news, lad. And—you know what trepanning is, of course?"

"Inserting a plate of—God in heavens!"

Like a flash of lightning that rends the blackest cloud, so the full truth made itself visible to Nash Baldwin in that one second. He staggered back, sinking to the rock floor, staring wild-eyed, dizzily and almost unseeing, into that bearded face before him.

"That's it, lad," nodded the other, in low but emphatic tones. "But before that silver plate was inserted, Theodore laughingly insisted on having the two initials of his name engraved on the inner side, that his skull might know what name to respond to when the last roll-call of all was sounded! I had it done—are you strong enough to look at this, my boy?"

He held out the silver plate which he had polished in the darkness and by the light of the lantern Nash Baldwin gazed on those initials.

## CHAPTER XXXIV.

## THE SKULL BEARS WITNESS.

THE shock was severe, but, as already explained in part, far less crushing than it would have been had Nash Baldwin known more of his father, as a father.

To his son, Theodore Baldwin had been but little more than a name, a dim, hardly realizable relative, although his mother had spent hours of her later life in talking to her son about his long-absent father.

Still, words, no matter how eloquent, no matter how many and how full of love, cannot do the work of daily association, and though Nash Baldwin was proud of his gallant soldier father, and though he had so often mourned over his unexplained disappearance, it was like losing a shadow, rather than the substance.

That this was the case, will account for his rallying so quickly from that shock, and explain why he felt far more of revenge than of crushing grief.

"You took this—It was his remains, then?" were the first words after that startled ejaculation when the marvelous truth burst upon his brain.

"That plate proves it—yes!" nodded Steve, one hand mechanically rising to feel of that bundle resting over his heart. "I felt it must be, when I first noticed that plate—you remember?"

"Yes," in subdued tones. "Why didn't you tell me, uncle?"

"Because I wouldn't admit that it *could* be true, even while knowing it *was*! I couldn't bear to think that *this* was how our trail was to end, lad!"

"End?" with a touch of fierceness coming into his voice, his dulled eyes catching even more than their usual brilliancy. "Only the beginning, Uncle Steve. The end is where the assassin now stands. And I swear to never rest until he has paid the full penalty due his crime!"

"Then you think—" hesitated the older man. "Have you so quickly forgotten your own words, Uncle Steve? Didn't you tell me that it was foul murder? Didn't you point out the broken blade that bore witness?"

The Sky-scraper gave a great start, brushing a hand across his forehead as though to clear away the lingering mists.

"I forgot—it's muddled my brain, lad, until I find it mighty hard work even to *think*—but I remember, now. There *was* a broken blade of some sort, and—"

"Where is the—*it*?"

But the question was superfluous. Hurst was already removing the skull from his bosom, and untying the knots with far from steady fingers, he unfolded the handkerchief, laying the grim witness on the rock floor between them.

Nash Baldwin gave a low cry as he noted its altered appearance, and then, for the first, he learned how the skull had preserved the life of him who carried it so carefully.

"I wasn't the first time, neither," muttered Hurst, gently touching the bones as he made that explanation. "My head would have looked like this, many a long year ago, only for the keen eye, strong hand and true heart of your father, lad! Time and again he saved my life, in those days, Nash, and I could talk to you for—"

"So you shall, but not now, uncle," interposed Nash, seemingly by far the cooler of the pair, just then. "This poor skull has given up one of the secrets it has held for so many years; let's see if it can bear still further evidence!"

The bullet had struck the skull squarely, yet the passage of years had weakened the plates so greatly that a number of splinters had fallen apart from the skull when the handkerchief was untied.

The plate through which that weapon had been driven, still remained in place, though the two men could see that the sharp shock had loosened it considerably.

Steve paused, with hand on the plate, looking up to meet the eyes of his nephew. Young Baldwin nodded assent and with gentle force the bony fraction was lifted, the piece of steel still firmly fastened to it.

To all appearance it had formed the greater portion of a slender-bladed dagger, or double-edged knife. Keen, though, point and edges must have been and were so still, only for the rust which incrustated the steel so thickly. The arm that sent it so deeply into a living skull had been gifted with more than ordinary muscle, or its owner fired by savage hatred or ungovernable rage.

"Don't loosen the bone!" muttered Baldwin, as his uncle lifted the fragment and began to scratch away that grim coating. "I want to thrust them both, just as they are, into the face of the murderer, before killing him!"

It was an aimless action on the part of Steve, that first attempt to remove the coating of rust or congealed blood and brains with which the broken blade was so thickly incrustated; but as his stout thumb-nail ate down to the steel itself, he gave a stifled ejaculation, and flashed a glowing look into the pale face opposite him.

"What is it? What have you found, Uncle Steve?" asked Baldwin, one hand flying out to take possession of the silent witness.

"Don't—I'm not so sure, but—there's some

ort of mark on this knife!" muttered the old soldier, his thumb-nail once more at work.

Although of the same color, that substance could hardly be called rust, since it proved quite easy to remove, and leaving the steel below with only a dull, bluish stain to mar its original brightness.

Little by little, working in utter silence, with the eyes of the young man fixed eagerly upon him, Silver-tip Steve never gave over his self-imposed task until nearly one-half of one side of the broken blade had been freed from that covering. Then, holding the grim witness so that the rays from the lantern fell fairly across it, the two men touched heads in their eagerness to see what had been laid bare.

"It's a monogram of some sort, etched upon the knife!" at length decided Baldwin, a faint echo of fierce triumph coming into his voice as he added: "The skull itself is helping us, Uncle Steve! By that broken blade—by the monogram it bears—we'll run to earth the demon whose hand sent the steel home through the brain of my father!"

Steve lifted his head, one hand almost savagely rubbing his temples. His eyes closed, his breath came short and hard. He seemed fighting with a mist which covered his brain as a veil.

Once more he bent over the silent witness, turning the steel from side to side, the better to examine those faint marks, each line of which was filled with the rusty-seeming coating. Then a sharp cry burst from his lips as he flung back his head, both hands clasping the witness which alone could tell them how Theodore Baldwin had come by his death!

That cry was heard by other ears, and Manuel Diaz came hastily to where the relatives crouched, a sharp warning on his lips.

"Would ye fetch those cursed ladrones down upon us, señores? If ye have no care for your own lives, at least give thought to that of a lady who—"

"Take it, lad," muttered the Sky-scraper, thrusting the united bone and steel into the hand of his nephew, then turning toward Manuel Diaz, the old soldier spoke: "I forgot, my friend, but when you come to know what caused that cry—look!" and he flashed forth a knife holding both it and the lantern toward the old Californian.

Manuel Diaz shrunk back a pace, one hand dropping to his belt of arms, like one who anticipates a treacherous assault. But Steve quickly undeceived him, by asking:

"Did you ever see such a blade before, my friend? Look at it close before you answer; did you ever see a blade marked like that, before?"

Diaz bent his head slightly, but a single glance at the polished weapon enabled him to answer with perfect confidence:

"Many a time, señor! 'Tis the mark of a black-hearted race, and—"

"Give it a name, then!" almost savagely interrupted Hurst.

"There is but one left to curse the earth, señor, and his name is Don Carlos Salcedo!"

"I knew it!" and the Hercules gave a low, fierce laugh, his eyes glowing as though backed by living fire. "This is the knife he tried to drive through my heart, at the landslide, last night! See!" flashing the weapon closer to the eyes of his nephew.

It really bore a monogram, the counterpart of that found on the broken blade, but—how could that stand for Salcedo?

"The same; a serpent coiled about the letter Z!" decided Nash, only to be enlightened by Felipa, who had been drawn to the spot by those unguarded voices, as of quarreling.

"'Tis a serpent, true, señores, but still a letter S, if you look. And its tongue—see you not that it forks to form the small letter y? That means 'S. y Z.' Salcedo y Zarate, linking together the family names of both father and mother. Do I make my meaning clear, señores?"

"Clear enough to make one thing dead sure! Clear enough to prove that Don Carlos Salcedo murdered your father, Nash Baldwin!"

## CHAPTER XXXV.

## THE SKULL'S LAST SECRET.

FELIPA and Manuel Diaz interchanged swift glances as those words fell from the lips of the giant, and their faces betrayed their thoughts—had this stranger gone crazy?

Almost without knowing it, Felipa shrunk back, and that movement drew the eyes of the younger man to her face. Swift to read the truth, this strange discovery had not stunned him too greatly to make an effort to clear away those doubts, and in a few words as possible, Nash explained the main object of their coming to California, and how they had at last found a positive clew to his long-missing parent.

Both listeners were astonished, but where Felipa quickly expressed her sympathy, Manuel Diaz said nothing, his face growing harder and his eyes colder. A new suspicion was forming itself, and unless this could be fairly explained away, might easily breed trouble in the near future.

While these explanations were being made, the veteran sat in silence, one hand holding the united bone and broken blade, the other hover-



ing protectingly over the bullet-splintered skull which still lay on the handkerchief between uncle and nephew.

Felipa seemed puzzled in a degree, even after Nash had told his condensed story. She was holding the knife taken when volunteering to explain that monogram, and now, touching the serpent-embraced letter, she asked:

"Why do you ask, senores? How can this give proof that the deed was the work of Salcedo's hand?"

"Is this proof enough?" grimly asked the Sky-scraper, holding out the broken blade, but without relaxing his firm grip upon it.

Diaz echoed Felipa's ejaculation; they both had identified the fatal weapon beyond the possibility of a doubt.

"And this came from the skull which dropped into my hands while digging under that gold-devouring den, senores?" asked Diaz, his glittering eyes flashing from face to face.

"As you can see, my friend," answered Hurst, gently touching the splintered skull on the handkerchief.

"And there is no longer any doubt that this skull belonged in life to the father of Senor Nash?"

"'Twas my father, Diaz, beyond a doubt," gravely answered Baldwin.

"Then—he was buried where Don Marcos del Cagatinta placed his treasure, senores! That treasure is gone—stolen! Who was the robber, senores?"

"Tio Manuel!"

"Thy slave, senorita!" bowed the Californian, but stubbornly adding: "You, senores, have spoken about a lost bonanza which you hoped to find. Don Carlos is trying to gain a lost bonanza. My mistress is here to reclaim a bonanza which belongs to her family alone. The spot where that treasure was hidden now holds a skeleton. In its skull is a bit of steel, bearing the crest of the Salcedo y Zarates. Now, whose hand removed this buried wealth?"

"If the hand of my father, sir, restitution shall be made by his son and his brother," a little severely answered Baldwin.

"I reckon the shortest way to get at the whole truth, is to pinch the devil whose totem is on both blades," growled the giant, flashing a half-angry glance toward the one who dared even insinuate aught against his long-lost friend.

Manuel Diaz seemed on the point of speaking further, when Felipa placed a hand on his arm, uttering a few words too low for the relatives to catch.

The Californian bowed his head in silent submission, falling back into the shadows.

Baldwin seemed inclined to join Felipa, as the maiden, giving back the knife which had so surely connected Don Carlos Salcedo with that now headless skeleton under the Mint, moved back to her former position in the gloom.

"Wait, lad," said Steve, noting that desire. "There's still a good bit of talking to do, and when we've come down to bed-rock, you'll have plenty of time for pleasanter things."

"What more can there be to discuss, uncle? We're at a stand-still until we can put our grip on that cursed Greaser!"

While talking, and even for some little time before, Stephen Hurst had been carefully replacing the splinters of bone, trying to restore the skull to its condition before Tom Ashley's bullet was sped; but it proved a difficult as well as delicate task, and now, just as he was on the point of success, several of the splinters slipped out of place.

"What matter, Uncle Steve?" Nash lowly questioned, a little shiver crawling over him as he watched the old soldier, whose touch seemed loving, caressing! "We must keep this out," holding up the broken blade and the bony plate attached. "Tie the rest up in your handkerchief, until we can give all a Christian burial."

"I reckon you're in the right, lad," assented Hurst, lifting the skull and gazing into its hollow eye-sockets. "It's all that's left for us to do, pardner, 'ceptin' makin' that devil pay all he's wuth fer the bloody work his hand done ye. So—"

There was a slight rattling sound from within the skull, and Steve broke off with a low cry of savage menace.

"It's his lead, I reckon, lad! I'll save it to send back to the one who— Come out, ye card from the devil!"

Finding a gentle shaking failed to dislodge the article which caused that sound, Hurst put more force into his efforts, and then something flew out, striking his arm and glancing off, to clink against the rock floor; a sound far different from that which a bit of battered lead would produce!

"Find it, boy!" urged the Sky-scraper, almost dropping the skull in his eagerness, born of a sudden hope. "Keerful that ye don't mash—"

His own keen eyes were the ones to succeed, and in another second he was holding a strange object to the light of the lantern!

An artificial eye, the gloss of which was but slightly dimmed!

It would be no easy task to class the sound that escaped his lips as Silver-tip Steve fully identified that final proof: for even with that

slight film covering it, he recognized the eye of his friend, brother-in-law, fellow-soldier, all in one, now gazing steadily into his face!

"I didn't know—was that my father's?" faltered Nash, seeming to feel this last surprise even more deeply than all the rest.

"That was your father's—yes, lad," nodded Steve, in strained tones. "I told ye he lost an eye at the same time he had his skull fractured, and—"

He broke off abruptly. He was turning that frail shell over in his fingers, when he felt a fragment fall away, doubtless broken off by that fall upon the hard floor. And then, his hand shivering perceptibly as he held the eye nearer the light, Stephen Hurst examined the reverse side.

The eye itself seemed perfect. The broken piece came from the inner side, and as he gently manipulated the cunning fabrication, it fell apart in Silver-tip's hand!

Two eyes—thin shells of colored glass—lay in that broad palm, and between them showed a bit of something nearly white.

"Wait—don't touch!" protested the old soldier. "I never thought of it, up to now, but Theodore, one day while talking over old times, when we used to play scout and spy in Mexico, laughingly declared that in case of another war, he could discount all other dispatch-bearers, if only by having a double eye made, inside of which he might bear his messages! Now, your hand's the steadiest, lad; feel if that is paper, or not!"

Nash Baldwin obeyed, though his own fingers were too unsteady to risk unfolding that tiny bit of thin paper, for paper it surely was.

"Then I believe the secret of the lost treasure lies before us, nephew," slowly, gravely said the old soldier. "I believe that your father sealed his secret up between these two eyes! Now—shall we try to solve the doubts at once, or wait—"

"At once, Uncle Steve! You know what Diaz hinted, and now—God grant we can convince even him that rather was an honest gentleman!"

Without another word Stephen Hurst bent all his care in that one direction, gently breathing upon the tightly compressed paper until its softened folds could be parted. Tiny black characters were revealed, and though they had to remove the glass globe from the lantern to gain sufficient light, at length the veteran managed to decipher those few words, as follows:

*"Tall rock, shaped like bottle. 50 steps due east, to twin-tree. Dig down 7 feet. One mile north of casa."*

The two men gazed into each other's eyes for a brief space, then Nash Baldwin said, softly:

"Come, Uncle Steve. We ought to let them know what we've found!"

Hurst made no objections, and shortly after he was reading that message from the dead to Felipa and Manuel Diaz.

"The Giant's War-club!" ejaculated the Californian.

#### CHAPTER XXXVI.

##### SWIFT RETRIBUTION.

DON CARLOS SALCEDO shrunk back from that whisky-tainted breath, but the low sound that escaped his lips was not altogether the offspring of disgust, as Jerry Black well knew.

"Fingers empty, boss!" he muttered, warily, his eyes on the alert, and taking note of that instinctive clutch at a knife-haft.

"You drunken knave!" hissed Salcedo, his black eyes glowing through the gloom with which they were now surrounded. "What have I to do with that skeleton?"

"Jest sling the mind o' ye back to the time when—"

Jerry Black broke off abruptly, his whisper dying out in a low whistle of seeming carelessness, for his keen ears caught the coming of footsteps, and a moment later Tom Ashley joined them.

His gaze flashed from one to the other, as though he suspected them of being engaged in mischief of some sort, but nothing in his words betrayed such doubts. Still, he managed to keep Don Carlos under his eyes while the arrangements for guarding the cave entrance were being completed, and Jerry Black had barely time to drop a hint that he would fix a time and place for another meeting, before the party struck off across the hill, for Hard Cash.

Jerry formed one of the little army, frankly stating that he would never believe in his rare good luck until he had squarely sampled the whisky kept at the Mint, without having to "go down in his pocket" to pay the score.

If it was his hope to complete arrangements with Don Carlos Salcedo that evening, he was doomed to disappointment. While below stairs, Salcedo kept close company with Ashley, and shortly after the Mint partners had settled upon their proper course to pursue, in order to bring to justice Silver-tip Steve and such accomplices as he might have enlisted to help him raid the place, Jerry Black lost sight of his game.

"All right, my covey!" was his mental comment, when this fact became settled. "Nother

day comin', an' your fightin' so dug-gun shy only makes me all the surer I'm ketchin' up to a real bonanza! See you later, my high-toned Greaser!"

Salcedo had accompanied Ashley to the room of the Mint Sport, where they sat in earnest discussion over the bottles and cigars until an early hour of the new day. And, on Ashley's invitation, Don Carlos accepted a share of the gambler's bed, instead of going to his own rooms.

Among other things they talked over that ghastly find in the tunnel leading out of the cellar, but Salcedo could not explain its meaning. And if Ashley doubted, all he could do was to await developments, with what patience he found ready to hand.

If Don Carlos hoped to stall Jerry Black off by wearing his patience out, or counting on his forgetting all else in his "full swing" at the bar and its attractions, he was counting without his host. The "old-timer" did improve his liberty, getting outside of enough strong waters to effectually down almost any ordinary man, but he looked amply sober enough to transact business when, at a late hour of the forenoon, he followed the Greaser Sport into the restaurant where he habitually took his meals.

"Day to ye, pardner!" grinned Jerry Black, like one who sees a compliment rather than menace or insult in scowl and curse combined. "I didn't jest ketch onto the time you sot last evenin' fer us two to come together in a heap an' talk over the good ole days when we both was— Anything done bit ye, pard?"

"What is it you want, curse ye?" hissed the Californian.

"Fu'st, to meet ye whar you kin cuss out loud, an' I kin sling the sober truth back at ye in hull chunks an' gobs, pardner! Second, to see ef you'll pan out pritty nigh as rich as I reckon the Mint Sports would ef a body was to go an' offer to tell 'em jest how that heap o' bones come thar!"

"You mean—"

"Business, chuck up!" with sudden change of tone and manner. "I've got a pritty good idee o' the game you're tryin' fer to play, an' I'm gwine to hev a fist-full o' dingbats, or kick the trough clean over. You sabe, senor?"

It was hard, but already that strong contrast was beginning to attract attention, and as the surest method of getting out of an ugly situation, Don Carlos whispered across the table:

"You know the Haunted Hacienda?"

"Bet I do!"

"I'll meet you there, just after sunset, this evening. Now, go!"

"I'll go. Be jest as sure you come. Ef not—I'll call on Tom Ashley an' Dan Collins. Chaw over that, will ye, boss?"

Throughout the remainder of that day, Jerry Black proved himself a perfect shadow to the Californian, and if the latter had any notion of trying to escape the coming ordeal by flight, he was forced to abandon the idea, long before the sun sunk to rest.

Jerry patronized the Mint bar frequently that day, though hardly doing as much damage as Ashley had counted on; but he could not be called strictly sober, nor yet wholly drunken, when he left town to keep that appointment made with the Californian.

He was following Don Carlos, too full of suspicion himself to trust one so decidedly reluctant for a meeting. And not until the ruins were fairly reached, did he come forward and join his former employer.

"Now, what do you want?" demanded Salcedo, facing his persistent shadow. "I have come here at your demand; why?"

"Cool an' easy, pardner!" nodded Jerry, with a grin. "Harder work roundin' ye up, then ef ye was a hull herd o' long-horns. Let a pore critter hev time to ketch a breath, won't ye?"

"No nonsense, you rascal! What do you want?"

"What I'm gwine to do, fu'st thing, too! An' that's make you git down off o' your high boss, pardner!" retorted the old-timer, showing his teeth to the full as viciously. "I know ye from top to bottom! An' ef ye don't let me git any way one foot in the trough, whar you've got all two both o' yours, I'll sing a song over yen' in Hard Cash, as 'll send ye up a tree too mighty quick fer kickin'!"

"I don't understand your meaning, sir," coldly retorted the Californian. "Are you quite certain you have not made a mistake? Can you make oath that I am the man you have in your mind's eye?"

"Be I a dug-gun fool, only hafe-way hatched, an' that of a rotten aig?" snarled the bummer. "You cain't come no gum games over Uncle Jerry, critter! Don't I know ye? Didn't I work under ye, come this long dozen an' over years sence? Didn't I do a job—or see you do a job, ruther—right whar Hard Cash is now standin'?"

"Not to my knowledge," coldly asserted Don Carlos, growing calmer as the other grew hot.

"What job are you alluding to?"

"Bluffin' is it?" with a short, hard laugh. "All right, pardner: I'll call ye, fer luck! What job, do you ax? The job that planted them bundle o' bones under one corner o' the Mint—no less!"



"In plain words, then, you are accusing me of murder?"

"Nothin' shorter, dug-gun ye, critter!" driven still further from the line he had marked out for himself by this unexpected coolness. "Shell I tell ye jest how it was jobbed?"

"Why should you?" with a careless shrug of his shoulders. "I have already heard enough—too much, for that matter! You are not the man I took you for, and I know nothing concerning this job, as you call it. So—allow me to bid you *adios*, senior!"

"No ye don't! Not so fast, Don Carlos! I say you killed that man, with your own hand! I say that you driv' a knife clean through his brain, jest beca'se he wouldn't, or couldn't, tell ye what had 'come of the bonanza you hired me'n my mates to help ye find!"

"You have been drinking too heavily, my poor fellow," said Don Carlos, in tones of mock sympathy. "This is but one of those crazy fancies which come to men of your caliber, just before all else turns to snakes and rats and—"

"Is it a fancy o' mine that you're tryin' to bunco Tom Ashley with that same lost bonanza, then? All right, my covey!" breaking into a disagreeable laugh as he flung out a hand, recklessly. "You kin go your own way, an' I'll go mine. I did reckon I mought pick up a bit bigger stake from you then the Mint Sport 'd give me fer openin' of his two eyes, but I know better, now!"

"Where are you going, Jerry Black?" asked Salcedo. "That means?"

"I'm gwine to find Tom Ashley, an'—"

"You lie! You're going to die!" snarled Salcedo, discharging the pistol he had drawn unseen. "Go tell your mighty secrets to Satan!"

Jerry reeled back, falling in a heap, but before Salcedo could do or say more, a stern voice called out:

"Hands up, you murderer, or I'll blow you through!"

That voice came from close behind him, and was recognized by the Californian even before he could make a motion to wheel, which he did on the instant; the speaker was Tom Ashley, the Mint Sport!

And his pistol exploded just as Salcedo turned to face him!

#### CHAPTER XXXVII.

##### THE TRUTH AT LAST.

FOR a brief moment, it seemed as though that shot must have missed its mark, despite that short range, for Don Carlos Salcedo stood erect, never wavering, before that shock, his pale face turned toward the Mint Sport, his dark eyes still full of fire as they gazed squarely into those of his slayer.

Then, without sound or voluntary motion, the Californian sunk to the ground, just as Tom Ashley was touching the trigger for another and more certain shot.

"Stiddy, critter!" rumbled a deep, stern voice, coming from a portion of the ruins partly to the rear of the Mint Sport.

Swift as thought Ashley turned his head, to catch sight of a giant figure, and to hear the additional warning:

"Ef ye don't b'lieve I've got ye lined, Tommy, jest try 'nother o' them snap-shots, *this way!*"

"At your peril, Thomas Ashley!" rung out another voice, coming from his left rear. "I'll blow you through at your first crooked motion!"

Flashing a glance in that direction, the Mint Sport distinguished a second shape, also with weapons pointed in his direction.

"Good advice, Ashley, and I'd take it quietly, in your place!" added a third voice, the owner of which stepped briskly out of the deep shadows into the moonlight where two bodies were lying, victims to the lust of gold.

"You, is it, Porter?" exclaimed the gambler, as he recognized the city marshal.

"I reckon 'tis, Ashley, and—"

"Do your duty, sir!" sternly cried Nash Baldwin, still holding the slayer of Salcedo under his revolver. "First of all, disarm that man!"

"By what right?" quickly demanded the gambler, rallying from the surprise. "You can't touch a man for defending himself, or—"

"That's all right, Ashley, but I've got to ask you for your gun, the marshal interposed, holding out his left hand for the weapon.

"Oh, come off!" indignantly. "Didn't I catch the fellow in the very act? Didn't he shoot Jerry Black down, like a cur? And when I called out to hold up, didn't he turn, ready to give me a dose of the same medicine?"

"Well, it didn't look just that way to me, Ashley, but if you—"

Porter plainly lacked one or two qualities which are indispensable to an officer of the law in a lawless region, although a more honest, sincere fellow never drew the breath of life. Still, if Tom Ashley had had no more dangerous adversary than the marshal to deal with, just then, he might have come off with flying colors.

"You talk too mighty much!" cried Old Steve Hurst, at the same instant springing from the cover to which he had crept without sound to

betray his progress. "Now—take his guns, critter!"

In that tremendous grasp, the Mint Sport was helpless as a child, and not entirely trusting the officer, Nash Baldwin advanced to make sure the gambler was thoroughly disarmed.

Once convinced that struggling was vain, Ashley ceased playing the injured innocent role, declaring that he had only acted in self-defense against a desperate man who had just murdered another.

"All the same, marshal," grimly commented Steve, as he took charge of the confiscated weapons, "you want to keep one hand an' anyway two eyes onto the gent. He's in your charge, now, an' you'll be held 'sponsible fer his bein' fetched when he's most needed. See?"

"How long since you've taken up with road-agents and burglars, Dick Porter?" sneeringly asked the Mint Sport; but Silver-tip paid no attention to that taunt, aimed though it was at his head.

He was bending over the prostrate form of Don Carlos, examining the wound inflicted by Ashley. His jaws squared almost savagely as he noted its position; only a miracle could prevent a fatal termination, and, though life still lingered, it would be nearly as great a marvel if Salcedo ever spoke a coherent sentence.

"How is it, uncle?" asked Baldwin, in subdued tones, coming from where he had been caring for Jerry Black. "Any hope?"

"Mighty little, lad! How goes it over yender?"

"He's living, and may possibly get over it, with good care. He acted as though he wanted to talk; but I wouldn't permit that without first asking your opinion."

"Ef he kin talk sensible, he must, though it kills him double-over!" sternly muttered the giant, removing all weapons to be found on the now faintly groaning Californian. "Time's past fer takin' chances, an' the hull truth's got to show up, this very night!"

Giving Baldwin those weapons, together with a few hasty directions in guarded tones, old Steve turned to where Porter was guarding the Mint Sport, and without a word of explanation, he flung Ashley to the ground, binding him hand and foot, leaving Baldwin to satisfy the bewildered marshal.

"I'll take the hull 'sponsibility, you mind," grimly announced Silver-tip, when his task was completed. "Ef he kicks, when he knows all, I'll be more'n glad to give him satisfaction—ef he don't go off the hooks fer want o' breath, afore-time!"

Though badly wounded, Jerry Black was far from being a dead man, and as soon as he had rallied a little from that benumbing shock, and fully comprehended the truth, that the men who were now questioning him, were deadly enemies to Salcedo, he seemed only too eager to tell all he knew.

"Set him up afore me, gents, an' read ef 'tain't all true, in the dirty face o' him!"

"He shall face you, later, pardner," quietly assured Stephen Hurst, one hand on the pulse of the injured man. "Don't strain yourself, Jerry. Keep in mind that unless you can tell the whole story, making every point perfectly clear, you may be cheated out of your revenge, even yet. Now—what about that skeleton found under the Mint?"

"'Twas his doin's that it come thar—I take my oath, boss!"

"Steady, Jerry! Keep cool, if possible. Now—what was the name of the man whose skeleton lies under the Mint?"

"I don't know. Ef I ever heard, I've clean fergot. But that cussed devil kin tell—he tuck letters an' papers from the body, afore he made us bury it in the treasure-hole!"

It was no easy task to hold Jerry Black down to a plain, straightforward tale, what with his wound, his savage hatred for Don Carlos, and his thirst for revenge upon the Californian. But, when the end was reached, there seemed no longer room for doubting who the owner of the skeleton had been in life.

It appears that Salcedo was on the track of the Del Cagatinta treasure, and had hired three men to assist him in the work, as that section was wild and dangerous, at that date.

They found the spot where the treasure had been hidden, but not the bonanza itself! All around were marks of prospecting, and it was only too plain what had become of the treasure.

By following up the traces, a solitary miner was found, and after vainly trying to make him confess—after using devilish tortures to break down his iron will, and making him tell whither he had transported the lost bonanza—Salcedo had killed him.

"He was like a crazy critter, gents," said Black, at that point. "He hed bloody froth flyin' out o' his mouth, an' his teeth was chompin' like the tushes of a wild hog! An' so—he up knife an' driv' it into the pore critter's head! Driv' it mighty nigh to the grip, fer I see the weepin break, an' thar wasn't more'n a inch o' steel left on the handle!"

Then, he added, Salcedo caused his men to bury the murdered miner in the hole they had excavated while expecting to find the lost bonanza. Many days were spent in vain search

for the treasure, after that, but the hunt was abandoned, at last.

"I never set eyes on the critter ontel I met him t'other night," concluded Jerry, "but I knowed him, fu'st-off! An' then—I was shoal on the bar—clean bu'sted, ye know! So I cluded I'd hit him fer a stake. An'—this is eend of it all!"

Don Carlos had recovered sufficiently to hear and understand at least the concluding portion of this dark confession, but he sullenly denied its truth, so far as he himself was concerned.

No active efforts were made just then to extort a confession, but, after a doctor had been brought from Hard Cash, and he had carefully examined the wounds of both men, giving it as a certainty that Salcedo could not possibly live more than a few hours, the nerve of the criminal gave way, and he made a full confession.

The account given by Jerry Black was true. He had killed the man, as described, in his hot rage at being so utterly baffled.

"Was there any name on the papers you took from his body?" asked Stephen Hurst. "Did you learn who that man really was?"

"Yes. His name was Baldwin."

Son and brother-in-law interchanged sad looks. This was the end of their long trail, then!

#### CHAPTER XXXVIII.

##### HOW BOTH CLAIMANTS WON.

THERE was a mighty sensation awaiting Hard Cash when the light of another day roused its citizens, and long before noon, every person in town knew just what had occurred, and the majority was more than sorry that fortune had denied them the happy privilege of "seeing the circus."

Satisfied that they had facts enough collected to act upon without endangering their own liberty, on account of the Mint affair, Stephen Hurst and Nash Baldwin had left their refuge, made their way to Hard Cash, told their story to a justice of the peace, procuring a warrant for the arrest of Carlos Salcedo on the charge of murder, then enlisted City Marshal Porter to make the arrest.

They were a little too late, however, and Don Carlos was already on his way to keep his appointment with Jerry Black at the Haunted Hacienda, with Tom Ashley dogging them both.

Not anticipating a tragedy, but hoping to gain still further proof against the Californian, our friends had crept up within ear-shot, marking every word that passed between those two rascals. Then—Tom Ashley, knowing that Salcedo had "played him for a sucker," chipped in before any other could even suspect his purpose.

Both Salcedo and Jerry Black had been conveyed to town, receiving the best possible care. The "old-timer" promised to recover, thanks to his iron constitution, but Salcedo was slowly sinking, his death but a question of minutes, now.

"He'll cheat the gallows, lad!" moodily muttered Hurst.

"He is dying; and the grave covers all!"

When Carlos Salcedo was dead, a small party called at the Mint, where Dan Collins was found in charge, grim and hard-eyed over the arrest of his partner. Still, when he was shown the double confession, and a claim was made for that headless skeleton lying beneath the Mint, he made no resistance.

"Just tell a fellow, though, stranger," he said, while watching that resurrection. "Was it for this you run a tunnel so far?"

"It was to make sure what was hidden right here—yes," gravely responded Stephen Hurst.

If Dan Collins gave those words a different meaning from what they really bore, who was to blame? So, without telling a lie, the real object of that tunnel was covered from sight, and neither Felipa del Cagatinta nor Manuel Diaz were brought into the case at all!

Both skeleton and skull were placed in a coffin, and after a short sermon was preached over the remains, they were buried. Not permanently, however. Nash Baldwin intended that father and mother should finally repose side by side in the village cemetery, near where he had first seen the light of day; but there still remained work to do, which might take a week or more.

That work, of course, was to recover the long lost bonanza, by following the brief directions given on that bit of paper, yielded up after so many years, in such a strange manner.

And with this end in view, uncle and nephew left Hard Cash, by the next train, but stopped off at a station only a few miles from Hard Cash, making their way back across-country, to finally rejoin Felipa and Manuel Diaz, in the hill refuge.

There warm greetings awaited them, though inspired by very different sentiments. While Felipa had never for a moment doubted the perfect sincerity and honesty of the Americans, not so Manuel Diaz!

He firmly believed that they would never again show up; that they would make all haste to unearth that much coveted treasure, and leave his young mistress to mourn the loss of the Del Cagatinta treasure forever after.



Only the positive commands of Felipa kept the suspicious old fellow from hastening at once to "The Giant's War-club," to test the accuracy of that chart given up by the dead man's eye!

That prolonged absence was quickly explained, and, no doubt, it was mere chance that led to Silver-tip Steve's drawing Manuel Diaz to one side, while Nash Baldwin slowly moved in the opposite direction with Felipa. Why not? Age to age, youth to youth!

Under cover of night, the quartette left the cave refuge and made their way to the first landmark mentioned in that chart, camping at the base of the tall rock which really resembled a mighty bottle standing on its bottom, quite as much as it did an irregularly-rounded Indian club.

Manuel Diaz led the way with the first dawning of a new day, to the "twin tree." Neither could there well be a mistake made in that connection, either, for though a number of other trees were near, none could so aptly be termed a twin as this; springing from one root, growing as one tree for a couple of feet above the ground, then curving apart for a short space, to rise straight upward once more.

Tools for digging had been brought, but before a blow was struck or a sod turned, Manuel Diaz briefly described several articles of gold plate which he knew had formed part of the Del Cagatinta treasure. On these the family crest was engraved, and if such should be found among the treasure planted there by Theodore Baldwin, could the truth be longer doubted?

"It's findin' afore knowin', pardner!" dryly observed Silver-tip Steve, glancing about in search of the most likely spot to begin work.

While Felipa prepared breakfast, the three men fell to digging, knowing that much work might lay before them, since no particular spot was mentioned in the directions written by Theodore Baldwin. And, rather oddly, old Steve forgot to consult the rude chart itself, until they were eating their morning meal.

This, however, showed the twin tree, and a tiny dot at its base was selected as the proper spot for searching; not difficult to locate, since the relative positions of tree and War-club were carefully marked on the paper.

And then, when the sun still lacked an hour of reaching the meridian, the long-lost treasure was brought to light!

Its wrappings were removed, and almost the first object seen, proved to be a cup of gold, bearing upon its side the crest of the Del Cagatintas!

Uncle and nephew interchanged glances, and both nodded at the same instant. And Nash, taking the cup, placed it in the hands of the maiden, saying:

"Take this, Felipa, and with it all the rest! What *your* father buried, *my* father unearthed, to bury again. Now his son restores what plainly belongs to you!"

"Not all;—you must take part, senor," murmured Felipa, her dark eyes falling before his steady gaze.

There was a brief silence. Then Nash spoke up, softly, but plainly:

"We are all friends here together; then why should I be afraid to speak out my honest thoughts? Felipa?"

"Yes, Senor Nash?"

"I cannot take *part*; it must be *all or nothing* between you and I!"

Those black eyes flashed up, dwelt for an instant, then sunk again. A soft flush crept into her face. Then, very softly:

"What does all mean, senor?"

Old Steve caught their hands and placed them together, crying out merrily:

"*All* means you for a wife, little lady! And if you don't consent to that, you'll see the lad cut his own throat—so, now!"

He dropped their hands. Nash slowly extended his arms, the love-light deepening in his eyes, a yearning smile on his face. And with a low, glad, yet sobbing cry, Felipa moved forward, to be tightly clasped to his bosom.

"Foller suit, dug-gun ye, critter!" roared the Silver-tip, rushing upon Manuel Diaz and fairly swallowing him up in a mighty hug, whirling round and round, the picture of fantastic delight.

And the withered old Californian?

As soon as he could slip from that embrace, he heaved a mighty sigh, crossing himself, then, half-dolefully, half-gladly:

"He's a Gringo and a heretic, but I'm glad to know that my dear *nina* will have such a gallant defender—when I am gone!"

Now that the death of Baldwin was fully avenged, neither of the two friends saw fit to appear against his avenger, leaving Tom Ashley to put in a plea of "self-defense." He was promptly acquitted, and was once more the popular "Mint Sport."

Jerry Black recovered from his wound, and soon after drifted away to be lost to sight if not to memory.

THE END.

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